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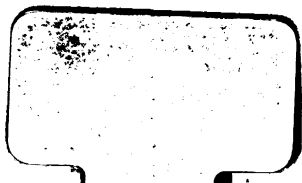
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1875

THE  
"Romance" of Peasant Life  
IN THE  
WEST OF ENGLAND.

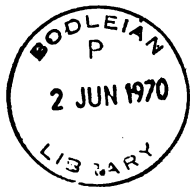
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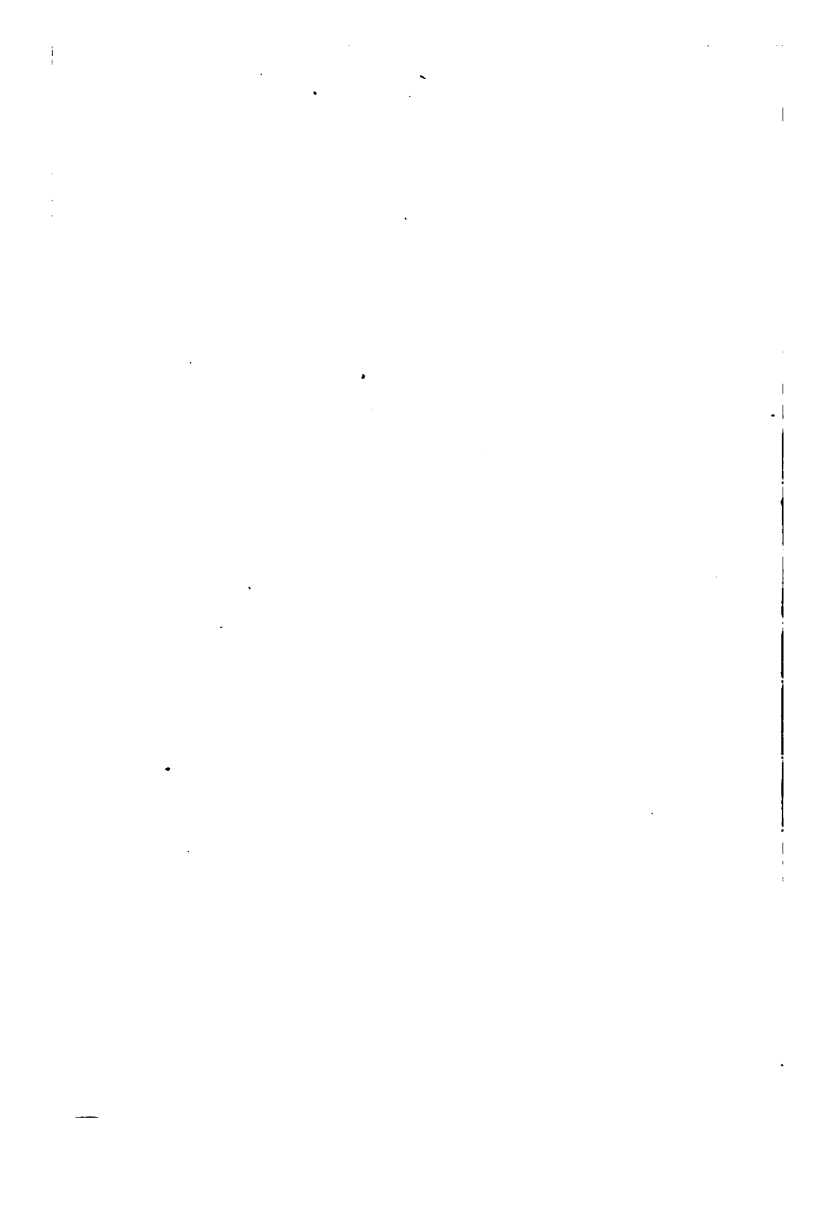
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LONDON:  
*PUBLISHED FOR THE AUTHOR, BY*  
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1872.



TO  
ROBERT ARTHUR KINGLAKE, ESQ.,  
ONE OF HER MAJESTY'S JUSTICES OF THE PEACE FOR  
THE COUNTY OF SOMERSET,  
ETC., ETC.,  
AS A MARK OF ESTEEM  
FOR HIS GENUINE KINDLINESS OF DISPOSITION,  
AND IN RECOGNITION ESPECIALLY OF THE  
WARM INTEREST WHICH HE TAKES IN THE WELFARE  
OF THE SOMERSETSHIRE PEASANTS,  
THIS VOLUME IS INSCRIBED  
BY HIS SINCERE FRIEND,  
THE AUTHOR.





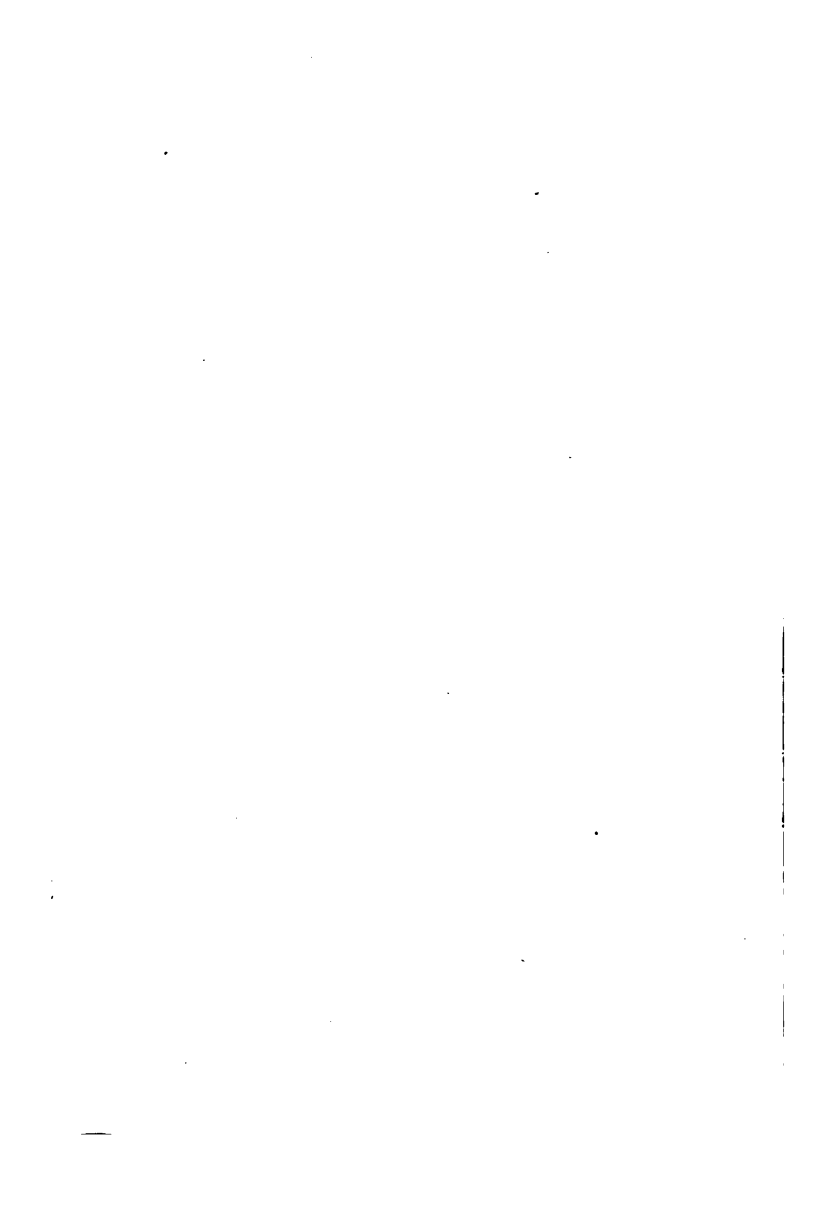
## PREFACE.

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I PLACE this, my first book, in the hands of the public in the hope that it may prove both interesting and instructive. Amidst the vast multitude of literary productions which exist in the present writing and reading age, I send forth my small volume to fight its way for a place in the popular estimation: a tiny bark launched upon a wide sea. Of one thing I am certain, namely, that my book treats of a thoroughly popular subject. Whether or not I have handled that subject in a manner which will please the public, it is for themselves to judge. All that I can myself say is, that my book is an earnest one.

FRANCIS GEORGE HEATH.

*London, August, 1872.*



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THE  
"ROMANCE" OF PEASANT LIFE.

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CHAPTER I.

DOWN THE GREAT WESTERN LINE.

"Black sin may nestle below a crest,  
And crime below a crown ;  
As good hearts beat 'neath a fustian vest,  
As under a silken gown.  
Shall tales be told of the chiefs who sold  
Their sinews to crush and kill,  
And never a word be sung or heard  
Of the men who reap and til ?"

*The Kings of the Soil.*

ONE of the most lovely journeys out of London is down the Great Western line. To reach the west of England by this route the traveller must, after quitting Middlesex, pass across Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Wiltshire, and a portion of Gloucestershire—a magnificent stretch of country, constituting some of the most fertile parts of England. After being con-

fined to London during the whole of the winter and the early spring months, it is impossible to conceive anything which is really more refreshing and delightful than taking a rush into the country in the lovely month of May. The huge city itself cannot resist the genial influence of the month of spring flowers. Within the great desert of houses the shrubs and trees, which here and there charmingly break the dull regularity of our metropolitan streets, burst into unwonted verdancy in the "merrie month." Even the uncongenial London soil is enriched by the wealth which lies hidden in atmospheric vapours, and which is collected and brought down to earth by the soft April showers. During May, therefore, there is about the streets a freshness which, once lost, never returns until the succeeding spring. But to obtain a real taste of nature one must leave far behind the smoke-begrimed houses of the metropolis; and there is no part of our rich old England where one can find more exquisite scenery than in the beautiful counties of the west.

" Oh, green was the corn as I rode on my way,  
And bright were the dews on the blossoms of May;  
And dark was the sycamore's shade to behold,  
And the oak's tender leaf was of em'rald and gold."

The Great Western Railway is one of the safest lines in England, and one of the most pleasant lines to travel over. Leaving the Paddington terminus by the 11.45 a.m. express train, we soon pass away from the

lines of houses and gain the open fields. When we have left Acton we become fairly launched into the country. We rapidly pass Ealing, Castle Hill, and Hanwell. From this point, making a gentle curve, we proceed over the Wharncliffe viaduct. Then on past Southall and West Drayton. We presently emerge from Middlesex, and reach Langley, the first station of the line in Buckinghamshire. Without stopping we rush through the Slough station, and on coming from it we catch a fine view, lying away to our left, of Windsor Castle. Taplow is soon reached, and we presently pass into Berkshire. We are not long in getting to the important town of Reading, with its population of over 32,000 persons. Still we do not stop or slacken our speed—except for an instant, whilst passing through the station-yard—until, after crossing Berkshire in its greatest length, we at last fairly stop at Swindon, in Wiltshire, our express having accomplished the journey of seventy-seven miles from London to Swindon in one hour and twenty-seven minutes. Ten long minutes we are compelled to stay at Swindon, because a binding contract has been made between the Great Western Railway Company and the refreshment purveyor at the Swindon station. The railway company, it is believed, would be very glad to get rid of this contract, the terms of which were not long since discussed in one of the law courts. But there is no way out of the difficulty. The officials dare not

permit any train to leave before the expiration of the full ten minutes required by the agreement between the directors of the railway company and the refreshment contractor, even if an express train be behind time. After Swindon there is no further stop until we have traversed almost the entire breadth of Wiltshire and have arrived at the beautiful city of Bath, on the north-eastern confines of Somersetshire. One brief glance at the lovely city and its delightful surroundings, and in twenty-three minutes more we have reached the terminus of the Great Western line at Bristol, having accomplished a journey of  $118\frac{1}{2}$  miles through the most beautiful and varied scenery, in two hours and thirty-six minutes. One portion of Bristol is in Gloucestershire and the other portion is in Somersetshire. Crossing the Avon we enter the last-named county.

Forty minutes from Bristol and the 33 miles of country which intervene between that city and Bridgwater are traversed by our fast express train, which runs through the Bristol and Exeter line to Exeter at the same high speed as between London and Bristol. A carriage is slipped at Bridgwater, and the main body of the express, without stopping, tears away at a terrible speed on its south-westward journey.

The month of May is, to an unprofessional observer, the best time for judging of the wonderful richness of the soil of the fine old county of Somerset. At that



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season the extensive pasture lands which stretch almost uninterruptedly from Bristol to Bridgwater are literally clothed with the beautiful buttercup, the presence of which in large numbers is well known to indicate the most fertile land. Buttercups add an inexpressible charm to the landscape, and during May they abound in such profusion that they give more than a golden hue to the fields.

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## CHAPTER II.

### THE "ROMANCE" OF PEASANT LIFE.

"Full many there be, that daily we see,  
With a selfish and hollow pride,  
Who the ploughman's lot, in his humble cot,  
With a scornful look deride ;  
But I'd rather take a hearty shake  
From his hand than to wealth I'd bow ;  
For the honest clasp of his hand's rough grasp  
Has been on the "Good Old Plough."

*The Good Old Plough.*

It has been truly said, and the saying is a very common one, that one-half of the world does not know how the other half lives. In the huge metropolis of England, with its three millions of living souls, there exists a vast amount of human misery. But wretchedness and squalor are not confined, as is too commonly supposed, to our great cities. Luxurious Londoners,

accustomed in their walks through the streets of the metropolis to meet at every turn the bent forms, the hollow and pallid faces, and the tattered garments which bespeak want in some of its most terrible aspects, are prone to imagine that distress and privation are only to be found associated with the narrow streets, the festering courts, and the close atmosphere which are, unfortunately, the necessary concomitants of the great centres of industrial life. It is naturally difficult for those who, at certain seasons, are enabled to take such a "rush into the country" as I have described in the previous chapter, to believe that the labourer who works in the fields under the blue canopy of heaven can be anything but a happy being. There is, in fact, so much in association; and as we wander by gurgling brooks, and through sylvan glades, and listen to the sweet songs of the birds, and see the glad sights which a wise and beneficent Creator has spread over the earth, and which are to be seen nowhere in such perfection as they are to be found

"Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,"

we cannot imagine that aught but happiness and contentment are the lot of the rustic swain. But nearly all of our native poets in their descriptions of English pastoral life have deceived us by their rose-coloured pictures of the peasants. I fear that too often the rein has been given to imagination, and the stern duty of

telling the plain, unvarnished truth has been subordinated to the desire for mere effect. At any rate, however faithful may have been the descriptions of pastoral life given by the older poets, as applicable to the times of which they wrote, those descriptions do not convey a truthful idea of the condition of the peasants in our own day. We nevertheless love to revel in the sweet delusions of poetry. Who can read without emotion Goldsmith's beautiful description of village life?

"Sweet Auburn! loveliest village of the plain,  
Where health and plenty cheer'd the labouring swain,  
Where smiling Spring its earliest visit paid,  
And parting Summer's lingering blooms delay'd;  
Dear lovely bowers of innocence and ease,  
Seats of my youth, where every sport could please;  
How often have I loiter'd o'er thy green,  
Where humble happiness endear'd each scene!  
How often have I paused on every charm,  
The shelter'd cot, the cultivated farm,  
The never-failing brook, the busy mill,  
The decent church that topp'd the neighbouring hill,  
The hawthorn bush with seats beneath the shade,  
For talking age and whispering lovers made!"

What a lovely picture is this of country life! Yet I cannot but think that it is an unreal picture; for Gray, who lived at the same time as Goldsmith, in his beautiful *Elegy* written in a country churchyard, says:—

"Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire,  
Hands that the rod of empire might have sway'd,  
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre:

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page,  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll ;  
Chill penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul."

I would, gentle reader, that it were my province to show in the succeeding chapters of my book that the condition of the modern English peasant realises Goldsmith's glowing description, written more than a hundred years ago, and that I could truthfully say that "health and plenty" cheers "the labouring swain." But it is my unpleasant task to tell of "chill penury," and of such a sad condition of life amongst the agricultural population in the west of England as may truly be said to freeze "the genial current of the soul."

A good deal has lately been written about the condition of the peasant in Dorsetshire. It has been customary to regard the tiller of the soil in that county of western England as the most wretched member of his class. During the discussions which have taken place in the newspapers in consequence of the "strikes" commenced by the Warwickshire agricultural labourers, comparisons have been instituted between the several conditions of the rural labourers in various parts of England; and it appears almost invariably to have been considered that of all the counties of the west, Dorsetshire furnished the most striking examples of misery and wretchedness. The Dorsetshire labourer has, in fact, been held up to the

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pity of the public, whose real sympathy has been centered in him. Notwithstanding the arguments which have been used on behalf of the landed proprietors and of the farmers against the poor serfs—who literally earn their *bread*—for it is rarely anything else—“by the sweat of their brow,” and notwithstanding the attempts which have been made to prove that the English peasant is, as the poets have described him, a happy being, and that his condition generally does not require amelioration, there can be no doubt left in the mind of any man who is at all acquainted with the subject, that of all the labouring classes in this rich England of ours there is none so truly wretched and abject, and none so really deserving of pity and help, as that of the poor down-trodden farm labourer.

I had long believed from my previous knowledge that in no county in England could the labourer in agriculture be in a worse condition than in the county of Somerset. It would have been fair, perhaps, to place the peasants in Somersetshire and Dorsetshire at the very bottom of the social scale. I believed that of the two counties Somersetshire in that respect was the worse, and that, too, notwithstanding the fact that there is no county in the whole of England which is richer and more productive. I was somewhat confirmed in my belief to that effect by the following extract from a Report on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture presented to both Houses

of Parliament, by command of Her Majesty, in 1843. Although the report was presented a long time ago, there was, I thought, every reason to believe that any rise that might have taken place in the wages of the agricultural labourer in Somersetshire since 1843, if any such had taken place, would not affect the proportionate difference in that respect existing between that and other counties. The Commissioner stated: "In the part of Somersetshire I visited the average wages during the whole year, paid in money, appear to be rather lower than in Wiltshire, but the labourer has an allowance of cider, three pints daily, considered by both master and labourer as worth about 1s. or 1s. 3d. per week; but in this county generally I believe the labourer has few or no advantages in addition to his wages, and probably, were the case accurately investigated, it would be found that in Somersetshire the labourer is worse off than in Wiltshire, and considerably worse off than in Dorsetshire and Devonshire. The letting of small allotments of a quarter, half, or three-quarters of an acre, and sometimes an acre or even more, has been rapidly on the increase of late years in Wilts, Dorset, and Devon, but has not been adopted in Somersetshire to any considerable extent."

I determined therefore to pay another visit to Somersetshire, from which I had been absent many years, and I believed that, by the "accurate investigation" suggested in the report from which I have quoted,

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I should discover a state of things truly terrible in its reality of misery, and that I should be able to prove that "fact is strange, stranger than fiction." I shall leave the reader to judge whether the facts which I shall have to disclose in the succeeding chapters are not a sad realization of the belief which I had too good grounds for entertaining, in relation to the deplorable condition of the peasants in one of the most beautiful of the counties of the beautiful west of England.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### A STORY OF THRILLING INTEREST.

"I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul."

*"Hamlet."*

I WAS passing one day through a street not far from London Bridge, soon after making the resolve to pay another visit to Somersetshire, when I noticed in a shop window a placard which very forcibly attracted my attention. The shop in question was a very handsome one, and inside its plate-glass front were arranged for show some of the most beautiful specimens of sculptor's work in marble and alabaster which I have ever seen. A crowd of people were collected in front of the placard to which I have alluded, and were very earnestly perusing its contents. These were certainly

of a startling nature. They referred to the case of John —, a fine young English labourer, strong and in full vigour, who, living in one of the richest and most productive counties in England, had received as payment for twelve months' toil in the fields just thirty-two pounds. Out of that sum six persons—the father, the mother, and four children—had to be housed, fed, and clothed. The placard went on to say that this man's case was not an illustration of the miserable lot of one, but of many thousands of his class; and that there were labourers living in Devonshire and Somersetshire who were even in a far worse condition. The foregoing statements were embodied in the form of a letter, which had been copied from a Somersetshire newspaper, and signed "A Looker on." At the foot of the letter, in larger type, was this paragraph: "It is a well known fact that three-fourths of the farm labourers of Devon and Somerset are only receiving eight shillings a week; and some of them have as many as fourteen children." This startling paragraph was signed "One from the Plough." I hardly know how it was, but there was something about this placard and its contents which strongly excited my curiosity. I could not help thinking that there must be some singular kind of connection between the proprietor of the handsome shop and the "One from the Plough," whose designation of himself had at first attracted my attention, written as it was in large bold letters. How-



ever, I determined to learn more about the case alluded to in the poster. I therefore entered the shop. I saw the proprietor, who assured me he could vouch for the strict accuracy of every statement contained in the placard. He moreover assured me that John ——, wretched as his circumstances were, was rich compared with thousands of the labourers in Somersetshire. He then told me that he himself was the "one from the plough" who had signed the poster exhibited in his shop window, and he said that he could tell me of things in relation to the Somersetshire peasants which would make my blood run cold. He had been induced to have printed and circulated all over London copies of the poster which had attracted my attention, because he had recently paid a visit to his native village in Somersetshire, and had seen the wretched condition of the farm labourers there. After this explanation he proceeded to tell me a thrilling story of himself.

George Mitchell (for such was the name of my informant) was born at the beautiful little village of Montacute, which is situated at a spot a few miles distant from the town of Yeovil in Somersetshire. His earliest recollections, from his childhood until he had reached his nineteenth year, were of nothing but misery and wretchedness. At seven years of age he was sent out to work in the fields, in order that he might earn something to help to keep the wolf from his poor parents' door. But he was only able to earn a few

pence for a whole week's work. He retained the most vivid recollection of the terrible privations to which he was at that time subjected. He often went out in the summer mornings as early as four o'clock, and frequently with no more to eat than a mouthful of bread. On reaching the farm he would be supplied with a small quantity of sour cider. Then he would go to his work. For the whole of the day on many occasions he had nothing to eat except what he could find in the fields. Incredible as it may seem, it is nevertheless the fact that he used to hunt in the hedges for snails, which, when he found, he would roast and eat. Mr. Mitchell assured me that he had often done this to stop the cravings of hunger. In the wild-berry season he sometimes gathered berries to eat. After his day's work the poor child, frequently weak, hungry, and exhausted, would return to his miserable home, where the family—ten in number—had gathered to partake of their supper. Suspending the three-legged crock over the fire, his mother would nearly fill it with water. Into this she would put a tablespoonful or two of flour, the second quality, obtained from the "tailings" or "grist" corn. Then she would add another spoonful or two of flour from her meagre store, and stir the whole round until the mixture boiled. Around the pot were meanwhile gathered a group of hungry children, looking wistfully and longingly at the operation; each child ready with his little coarse brown dish. As soon as

the boiling process was completed, the mother would pour into each dish a quantity of the flour and water, or thin paste, as it really was. When the children had all been served, the flour gruel was flavoured by the addition of salt; sometimes by adding a small quantity of treacle to it. This frequently constituted the only *meal* of the day. But often the poor children were compelled to go hungry to bed in order that in the obliviousness of sleep they might find a temporary relief from the cravings of their unsatisfied appetites.

George Mitchell, as a youth, was treated with the greatest harshness and cruelty by his unfeeling master. He was kicked and cuffed about like a slave. The rough treatment continued during the whole of the time that he was serving as a farm labourer. When about nineteen years of age his frame had become so inured to the hardships to which he had been subjected that, notwithstanding his life of privation, he was strong and vigorous. This result may no doubt be ascribed to the fact that he was endowed by nature with an iron constitution. At this time, although he was able to do the work of a man, he was paid no more than four shillings a week. The reader will scarcely credit the statement, but it is nevertheless perfectly true. For this miserable pay he was compelled to work, during harvest time, from four in the morning until ten at night. On one occasion, during the hay-making season, he rose at four in the morning, and har-

rowed a field of turnips. He then commenced hay-making. After toiling for nearly eighteen hours his exhausted frame, strong and vigorous though it was, began to sink under his long-continued labours. He lay down to rest upon a "pook" of hay. His master saw him, and ordered him to help in unloading another waggon of hay, accompanying the request with a string of oaths. George refused to do so, pleading that his strength was completely worn out, and that he had scarcely tasted any solid food the whole of the day. His master called him a lazy —, made a rush at him, and attempted to kick him. George avoided the blow, and went home, determining that he would emancipate himself from the dreadful slavery to which he had been subjected. His pride was offended. He had been called a lazy fellow, and he could not endure the thought. So on the next pay-night he gave his master notice that he would leave his service at the end of a fortnight. The master tried hard to keep him, knowing that he would lose a valuable servant, badly as he had treated him. George, however, was determined he would not stay any longer in the employ of such a tyrant. As an inducement to the lad to remain in his service, the master gave him, when the notice expired, for the last two weeks of his time two extra shillings in addition to his weekly wages of four shillings. George took the money, remarking as he did so that he would spend the additional sum in buying shoe-leather,

that he might leave his native village and seek his fortune elsewhere. His employer told him that he would be glad to return to his service in a month, and would regret that he had ever left it. "But, sir," said my informant, "that month has never expired yet."

I could not disguise the interest which I felt in Mr. Mitchell's story of his life. Was it possible that the man who stood before me, surrounded by everything which betokened the wealthy merchant in a great city, should have been once a poor farmyard boy, searching about in the fields to find snails to stop the cravings of his hunger; subjected to blows and ill-treatment, and almost crushed into the earth by the tyranny of a hard and cruel taskmaster? Such, however, was the case. I could not doubt the truth of the words to which I listened. The greatest of all dramatists says,—

"There is a tide in the affairs of man,  
Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune."

and, singular as it may seem, it appeared that the circumstance which decided George Mitchell's course in life was his having been called "a lazy ——." Whatever other faults he might have possessed, he felt that he did not deserve to be called a lazy fellow. He could not brook the stigma thus cast upon his character.

I listened with increasing interest whilst Mr. Mitchell proceeded with his narrative. As soon as he had left

the Montacute farmer's service he went home and prepared to start on his journey. He had no wealth of luggage, as will be supposed. At that time he could neither read nor write. A few coppers were all that he possessed in the shape of money. He left home however. He soon found employment in a stonemason's yard, and acquired some knowledge of the stonemason's trade. He stayed in his native county for a year and nine months, during which time he had in several places found temporary employment in connection with the same trade, and had been able to get a better insight into it. At the expiration of the year and nine months he had money enough to enable him to come to London. He came to London accordingly, and continued to follow the business at which he had been working since he had left his native village.

When he came to the great city he could not read the names of the streets. In almost every way, in fact, his ignorance of reading and writing was a great bar to his advancement. Soon after his arrival in London he fell in with a Sunday-school teacher, who asked him to attend the Sunday-school with which he was connected. George consented, and he was then directed to teach some of the younger children their lessons. He did not like to bear the humiliation of admitting that he could not read or write, and he therefore undertook the task. He had not proceeded far in the lesson when the children came to a word which they could

not spell. They naturally asked the teacher to help them. Poor George was in a great dilemma. He did not know what to do. He said to the children, "Come, you *must* spell this!" Still they could not spell it. He then said, "What dunces you are!" hardly knowing, in fact, what to say or do. At this moment, he told me, the eyes of all the school were upon him. At last a way out of his difficulty occurred to him. He turned to some other children standing near, and one of them at once spelt the word. This circumstance naturally made him feel most acutely the very great disadvantage of being unable to read or write. He therefore applied himself to learn, and before long he had overcome the difficulty under which he had laboured.

The remainder of George Mitchell's career may be told in a few words. During the twenty-five years that he has been in London he has exhibited a truly remarkable amount of perseverance and ability in the prosecution of his business. From step to step he slowly and surely advanced. From a mason's lad he became a journeyman; and from a journeyman a small proprietor; and from the position of the small proprietor he advanced to that of the rich and prosperous merchant; and I am assured that at the present time his business is one of the most prosperous of its kind in England.

"But," said Mr. Mitchell to me, "in my great pros-

perity I have not forgotten my former condition in life. My heart bleeds for the poor farm labourers in my native village, and I have told them that if the farmers will not better their condition, I will guarantee to find employment for three hundred of them in connection with my own trade in London." After hearing Mr. Mitchell's narrative I felt confirmed in my determination to take a journey into Somersetshire.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE FRIENDS OF THE PEASANT.

Go look through merrie England ;  
Of all the shires you there may see,  
Oh ! the fairest is green Somerset,  
The flower of all the west countrie !

*Old Ballad.*

SOMERSETSHIRE is one of the largest counties in England, comprising an area of 1,642 square miles, or to speak agriculturally, 1,050,880 acres; and it is a singular circumstance that, being naturally one of the richest of the English counties, the status of its rural labourers should be so low. From the observations which I have made I have come to the conclusion that it is, as a rule, in those parts of the country where the condition of the agricultural labourers is the most miserable and wretched, that there



exists the least desire on the part of that truly unfortunate class to raise themselves from their abject position. The labourers in Warwickshire, who were the first to "strike" and to unite, were paid better than the very best paid portion of the labourers in Somersetshire. But there is no doubt that the reason why the Somersetshire peasants are so apathetic is because for so many generations they have been oppressed and down-trodden to such an extent as to have lost even the desire to ameliorate their condition. I do not say that in Somersetshire, as elsewhere, there are not cases in which kind and generous masters treat their labourers well in every way; but I maintain that such instances are quite exceptional, and that as a rule the labouring classes in that county are wretchedly paid and wretchedly treated. In my opinion, the labourer ought not to be dependent upon the benevolence of his master. The tiller of the soil forms an important element in the industrial system of the country, and he has as much right to demand and receive a fair market price for his labour as any other member of the working population. Because the poor serf, who for ages has scarcely dared to raise his head from the ground which he ploughs and sows with grain for the support of the country, is indifferent to his own moral, mental, and social welfare, is no reason why attempts should not be made by the philanthropic to raise him from his low estate.

The great landowners in Somersetshire, although several of them are non-resident in that county, cannot plead that they are ignorant of the condition of the labourers employed on their estates, for, from the Report of the Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture, presented to both Houses of Parliament nearly thirty years ago, namely, in 1843, an extract from which report I have given in a previous chapter, it will be seen that the agricultural labourer in Somersetshire is worse off than in Wiltshire, and considerably worse off than in the neighbouring counties of Dorset and Devon. Although in the period that has elapsed since 1843 land in Somersetshire has risen in value to the extent, as I have been credibly informed, of 25 per cent., taking the county generally, the labourers' cottages are, with a few exceptions, in a wretched condition; a state of things which is clearly the fault of the great landowners, whose business it is to build and put in proper repair the cottages on their estates; and the wages paid for agricultural labour were at the time of my inquiry very little better than they were thirty years ago. This is no exaggerated statement, because its truth can be proved by a reference to the Poor Law Reports for 1843 and 1870 respectively.

Notwithstanding the general indifference of the Somersetshire agricultural labourers to their wretched condition, I was glad to find no lack in that county

of those philanthropic efforts which alone will conduce to the real elevation of the rural labourer. The truly noble work which Canon Girdlestone carried on in Devonshire for so many years, I found had commenced in Somersetshire, and the man who is fairly entitled to the credit of having originated the movement is my friend Mr. Robert Arthur Kinglake, a brother of "Eothen," who is also known to fame as the historian of the Crimean war. On the occasion of an annual visitation of Archdeacon Denison to his clergy, which took place at Taunton on the 15th of April in the present year, there was a dinner given, at which the archdeacon, the clergy of the deanery, and a large number of the county gentlemen and farmers were present. Mr. Kinglake, in an after dinner speech proposed "Prosperity to the Yeomanry of Somerset!" and whilst congratulating the farmers present on their general prosperity and the progress they had made in education, took the opportunity of referring to the deplorable condition of the agricultural labourers in the county. That was the first occasion of any real prominence being given to the subject of the labourer in Somersetshire since the commencement of the Warwickshire "strike;" and it required no small courage in an assemblage of landed proprietors, farmers, and divines—the latter of whom do not generally, I am sorry to say, take that active interest which they might do in the cause of the labourer—to speak out boldly for the poor peasants.

The feeling of the agriculturists at the meeting was manifested by very impatient exclamations during the delivery of the excellent remarks which were made by Mr. Kinglake. He is a county magistrate of twenty years' standing, and being one who professes old Whig or modern Liberal-Conservative principles, it cannot be said that his advocacy of the cause of the labourers is the result of that ultra-Radical or revolutionary tendency which is alleged to have given rise to the agricultural labourers' movement. Mr. Kinglake said that he was glad there were no agricultural "strikes" in Somersetshire, but he much regretted to find that wages were so low as 8s. and 9s. a week in many parishes, especially in the neighbourhood of Wellington, Stoke-St.-Gregory, and Long Sutton. Three suggestions which were made by Mr. Kinglake are so excellent that they deserve particular notice. The first was that the system should be adopted in England which has for some time been the practice in Scotland, namely, that a register of farm labourers should be kept in agricultural towns in the same way as registers are now kept for domestic servants. The second suggestion was that societies should be formed all over the country for repairing and building labourers' cottages: such societies had already been formed in Kent, Shropshire, and other counties, and had proved successful. The third suggestion, which Mr. Kinglake originated, is one ad-

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mirably calculated to advance the cause of the rural labourer. It was that a weekly journal should be started especially devoted to the interests of the farm labourers. This is an excellent idea, and as almost every class in the country has now its organ, it is to be hoped that some philanthropic individual may be induced to start what might be called the *Agricultural Labourers' Journal*. I am firmly convinced that the agricultural labourers' movement will never be put down until their present deplorable condition is ameliorated. There are many noble hearts in this country ready and willing to come to the assistance of this downtrodden race of men. But London readers can have but little idea of the great difficulty of the undertaking in remote rural districts. Noble and disinterested efforts are being made by such men as Canon Girdlestone and Mr. Arthur Kinglake, but they have a hard battle to fight against the landed proprietors and the farmers, whose active enmity they have in many instances to encounter.

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## CHAPTER V.

## THE VALE OF WRINGTON.

"Join'd to the prattle of the purling rills,  
Were heard the lowing herds along the vale,  
And flocks loud bleating from the distant hills."

*Thomson.*

DEEPLY embosomed in the heart of the Mendip Hills, about twelve miles to the east of Weston-super-Mare, and about the same distance to the south-west of Bristol, lies the Vale of Wrington. Proceeding from Weston-super-Mare, the road to this delightful vale runs to the north of the Mendips, through the most beautiful and romantic scenery. As far as the eye can reach, on every side, stretch rich pasture lands, the various and exquisite tints of the May green contrasting charmingly with the golden flowers of the buttercup. Even on the hill-sides the pastures extend, only broken here and there by thickets of trees, the dark and almost invisible green of which lends a sombre majesty to the scene. Numbers of sheep and oxen, all along the line of route, are seen grazing on the pastures. The county is celebrated for its dairy produce, the

celebrated Cheddar cheese, which is furnished from the neighbouring Cheddar valley, being widely known for its excellence. Driving from Weston-super-Mare to the village of Wrington, soon after my arrival in Somersetshire, I endeavoured to make the best use of my opportunity of enquiring into the condition of the peasants. When about a mile or two away from the first-mentioned place I stopped and accosted an old labourer, and made some pertinent enquiries about himself. He told me he was seventy-seven years of age, and had worked as a farm labourer in that part of the country nearly all his life. He was then receiving 7s. a week, out of which he had to pay 1s. 6d. a week for his cottage. He had received somewhat better wages when younger; but I could not help thinking it hard that a hale old man (for my informant had all the appearance of being one) could not, after more than sixty years of hard toil, obtain more for food and clothes than the miserable pittance of 5s. 6d. a week.

I ascertained that in this neighbourhood wages had received some kind of addition just previous to my visit, and that for the most skilled work they were 11s. or 12s. a week. I was little prepared, however, for what I saw a few miles farther on the road, in the parish of Banwell, and about six miles from Weston-super-Mare. Lying a little way back from the road, I descried what I should have thought was a pigstye, but for the fact that a man was at a kind of door,

cutting up a dead sheep. I called him out and questioned him concerning himself and his cottage. I was then invited by him to visit the interior of the latter. Unless I had seen it I could not have believed that such a place could exist in England. I had to stoop very low to get inside this habitation of an English agricultural labourer. The total length of the miserable hut was about seven yards, its width three yards, and its height, measured to the extreme point of the thatched roof, about ten feet; the height of the walls, however, not being so much as six feet. From the top of the walls was carried up to a point the thatched roof, there being no transverse beams or planks. In fact, had there been any, I could not have stood upright in this hovel. There was, of course, no second floor to the place, and the one tiny floor was divided in the middle into two compartments, each being about three yards square; one used for a bedroom and the other for a sitting-room. The ground was irregularly paved with large stones, with earth between and in their crevices. On my remarking that the floor must be very damp, if not wet, in winter, the man said, "Oh, no, sir, it don't 'heave' much;" by which he meant that the moisture did not come up very much through the stones. From the thatch, in all directions, hung festoons of spiders' webs, intermingled with sprays of ivy, which, but for the terrible squalor of the place, would have given a romantic appearance to the hut.



John P—— (the inhabitant of this “cottage”) was a short, thickset man sixty years of age. He had lived there, he told me, a quarter of a century. His predecessors were a man, his wife, and six children, all of whom he said had slept in the “bedroom,” nine feet square. John told me that he could not work now so well as he used to do; but nevertheless he looked strong and healthy for his age; and his principal duty—a responsible one—was to look after his master’s stock. His wages were 5s. a week. Out of that he paid his master £2 10s. a year rent for his “cottage,” and 10s. a year more for the privilege of running his pig—for John had a pig, as well as some fowls—on his master’s land. John also rented one-eighth of an acre of potato ground, for which—still out of his miserable wages—he paid 15s. a year. And yet this man was happy amidst it all. His wretched patched garments looked singularly inconsistent when viewed in connexion with his happy-looking face. He spoke well of his employer. His cottage walls were made of hardened mud, and some time since the rain had come through the old thatched roof, and he thought it was very good of his master to put a new roof and a new door to his “cottage” when he asked him to do so. John had been married, but had lost his wife. One daughter however, was still living, and she had married a policeman in London. John said that when his cottage became no longer fit—according to John’s idea of fitness

—for a "residence," "the master" intended to throw down the mud walls and plough up the site.\*

A drive of about six miles further brought me to the lovely vale of Wrington. The great landowner in the parishes of Wrington and Burrington is the Duke of Cleveland, who, as a Whig politician, has in both Houses of Parliament given proof of considerable administrative ability. The wages of the labourers in this district were, on the average, 11s. or 12s. a week. There are, however, only a limited number of allotments, the Duke, or rather his agent, always inclining to increase the size of the large farms on his estate by throwing into them every available plot of ground. The great want in this district, a want which is very severely felt by the poor labourers, is for more cottages. The cottages on the estate generally are bad; the drainage, I was told, is also bad. Overcrowding is the natural consequence of the absence of proper accommodation for the labouring population. But the Duke or his agent will not build, although I was informed that there were 1,000 acres of land belonging to his grace, used as a common, but admirably adapted for

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\* On the eve of sending my MS. to the printer I have learnt, in reference to John P—, an incident that I venture to believe will interest my readers. I am assured that John never feels dull or lonely *except when his clock*—for he has a clock in his "cottage"—*ceases to tick* from any cause.

sites for cottages. I was assured that the labourers had great difficulty in getting milk from the farms, the greater portion of the butter-milk being given to the farmers' pigs. This is a very important matter, because medical men consider milk to be such an excellent article of diet ; and there is no doubt that milk, used with the bread of the labourer, constitutes an important item in his food ; and considering his wretched fare, he ought to have an abundance of it. In fact, too often, I am sorry to observe, the rearing of horses, sheep, and cows, the housing of dogs, and the fattening of pigs, appear to be of far more importance to the farmer than the care of his labourers. The Duke of Cleveland has the reputation of being a liberal landlord. In that case, his residence in Wrington, which he has not visited more than twice, I believe, in six years, would be a blessing to the rural population. Even his grace's agent does not live in the place, but resides at Bath. What is, therefore, sadly wanted in the district is some representative of the noble Duke to look after the physical and social needs of the inhabitants. I was glad to find that there were in the place two excellent resident magistrates—Mr. Long and Mr. Edwards—who have exerted themselves admirably for the good of the inhabitants ; but I was sorry to notice that the administration of justice was carried on in a small room in the village, instead of being conducted in a building specially adapted for the purpose. If the

attention of the Duke of Cleveland were called to this circumstance he would no doubt remedy the matter. I must not forget to mention that Hannah More, who lived at the adjacent Barley-wood, lies, with her four sisters, buried in Wrington churchyard; nor that Wrington possesses perhaps the finest church tower in all Somersetshire, and, moreover, that it is the birth-place of John Locke.

Situated in the Vale of Wrington, and in close proximity to the line of the Mendip Hills, is the beautiful village of Burrington. From the village of Wrington I drove to this place. By the kindness of the Vicar's family I was permitted to see the excellent school connected with Burrington church. The vicar is the Rev. William Bishop de Moleyns, M.A., who has earnestly laboured for twenty years in the neighbourhood. He was for the greater part of that time the curate of Wrington, but was so universally beloved by the people in all the country round that the living of Burrington was presented to him by the parishioners, in whose gift it is.

“ Wide was his cure ; the houses far asunder ;  
Yet never failed he, or for rain or thunder,  
Whenever sickness or mischance might call,  
The most remote to visit, great or small.”

In the midst of a population of only 400 souls he has a school of boys and girls numbering no less than 103, principally the children of the peasants, although

the education, given under the immediate superintendence of the excellent master and mistress, is so good that farmers are induced to send their children to the school. During my visit to the schoolroom the children sang a simple melody, entitled "Always speak the truth," and I considered that for so young a band the execution was admirable. No compulsory educational system is required at Burrington; and I think it is a remarkable circumstance that with so small a population so good and so flourishing a school should be established and maintained. A necessary enlargement of the existing school building is required, and I sincerely hope that the necessary funds will be very soon forthcoming. If one thing is required more than another to raise the peasant to his proper position in the social scale, it is efforts for the education of the children of the labouring poor such as are being so nobly put forth at Burrington by the Rev. Mr. de Moleyns.

Since my visit to the Burrington vicarage a dark shadow has fallen over the household of the excellent Vicar. Mrs. de Moleyns, a loving wife, a tender mother, and a good and true friend to the poor in her village, is now no more. Her death was very sudden, and I felt deeply pained on hearing the sad intelligence, because I had visited the home that was made bright by her presence, and had heard of her good and gentle life. For nearly twenty years she had quietly and unostentatiously been doing the work of a truly Christian

lady, and whilst her loss is bitterly felt in her own home circle, it is a loss that is scarcely less felt in the homes of the peasantry in Burrington and its neighbourhood, where, whilst her active benevolence has relieved the wants of the sick, her Christian sympathy has been ever ready to comfort the sorrowful.

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## CHAPTER VI.

"TWO TAPS RUNNING."

    " Search we the springs,  
And backward trace the principles of things :  
There shall we find that when the world began,  
One common mass composed the mould of man."

*Dryden.*

I THINK it is of the highest importance for the peasant that he should have a journal especially devoted to his interests. A large number of the local papers in the rural districts are devoted to the interests of the farmers, and are in a great measure supported by that class, and when these journals do not oppose the labourers' movement they observe a discreet reticence. The journals which circulate in the cities and in the larger towns in the west of England are necessarily more independent, and I notice that nearly all such advocate the amelioration of the condition of the peasant. The present movement is a humane

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one, and is not, as some people pretend to consider it, the result of a revolutionary reaction. The Earl of Radnor, whom probably no one will suspect of a revolutionary tendency, when charging the grand jury at Devizes, not very long since, in his capacity of chairman of quarter sessions, made some very important remarks. He said there was one matter on which he wished to say a few words, namely, what were termed the “Agricultural Strikes” now existing in various parts of England. He disliked the word “strike,” because it savoured of dissension and strife. He would rather allude to the question as the “Agricultural Movement.” He, for one, confessed that he did not see why the agricultural labourers should not respectfully ask for an increase of wages. The wealth of the country had enormously increased of late years, and most classes of society had been benefited by that increase. The labouring classes had not been benefited quite so much, perhaps, as other classes of society; and it was, he thought, only natural that they should try to benefit from the increased wealth of the country, which, they must all agree with him in thinking, had been enormous. Should the movement extend into these parts, as possibly, if not probably, it would do, he sincerely trusted that it would be met in a conciliatory spirit, and that there would be no coercive measures on either side. *He felt strongly, he said, that the existence of a kindly feeling between*

*employer and employed was essential to the general well-being of the community.* He hoped, therefore, that if the labourers respectfully asked for an increase of wages, the employers of labour would deal with the matter in a kind and conciliatory spirit.

I have quoted these remarks of Lord Radnor because, coming from such a source, and having an especial reference to the west of England, they are interesting. Whilst all right-thinking men deprecate "strikes," those, on the other hand, who are the best able to judge consider that nothing but union will permanently improve the condition of the agricultural labourer. Professor Fawcett, in his excellent work on political economy, whilst condemning "strikes," goes on to argue in favour of combination amongst workmen. He says: "When the existence of a power of combination amongst the labouring classes has been fully demonstrated it will exert its influence potentially, or, in other words, the whole influence will be exerted without the power being brought into action. It is in this manner that national armaments produce their effects. Our navy may be a complete protection to our shores, although it does not fire a hostile shot for a century—our shores are protected because it is known what our navy can do if it is required to put forward its power. In a similar way the workmen may obtain all the results which a combination can give them without ever assuming towards



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their employers any such hostility of attitude as a strike implies. When this power of combination is fully recognised all that can be secured by it must be peacefully conceded, and therefore, instead of enmity being perpetuated, increased harmony and good will will be guaranteed. The workman will become a participator in his master's prosperity; and if he shares in his prosperity he will learn to suffer with him in times of adverse trade. The workman may thus be taught one of the most valuable of all lessons, namely this, that capital is not a tyrannical power, which oppresses him, but is the source from which he obtains his livelihood."

One great difficulty with the peasants in Somersetshire is what is called "the cider question." This county being one of the finest cider-producing counties in England, the system prevails of giving the labourers daily, in small kegs or firkins, a certain quantity of cider, varying in different districts, but seldom less, I believe, than three pints per day. I obtained the testimony of an old man, who has had fifty years' experience as a farm labourer, and he gave me a truthful description of the horrible liquor that is given to the agricultural labourer under the ironical name of cider. It is a well-known fact that in Somersetshire, and in other of the western cider-producing counties, the farmer nearly always keeps "two taps running," according to the expression of that part of the country:

one tap for himself and his friends, and one tap for the farm labourers. The farmer's own cider—I can speak from my own knowledge as well as from the evidence of my informant—is most carefully made. The very best apples are selected, and the manufacturing process is carefully gone through, and real cider is produced. If a stranger to the country wants to taste the best cider, the farmer will give him what he will tell him in confidence that he keeps for his "own drinking." Now for the labourers' cider—tap number two. The very worst apples are, in the first place, selected—the "windfalls;" and these, with dirt and slugs, are ground up for the peasants. When the "windfalls" are used for feeding the pigs the labourer has what is called the "second wringing"—that is to say, the apples for the farmer's "own drinking" cider are put into the press, and after the best part of the juice has been extracted the cider "cheese," as the mass of apples in the press is called, is subjected to yet greater pressure, and what is expressed from the "cheese" on this occasion is called the "second wringing." This is greatly inferior to the "first wringing." To complete the process and make a liquor worthy of tap number two, the following plan is adopted:—To every hogshead of the "second wringing" is added four gallons of hop-water. This is added for the purpose of preserving the "second wringing," which without such addition would, from its thinness

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and inferiority, turn to vinegar. My informant, to give me some idea of the difference in quality between the farmer's "two taps," said that good cider usually costs about 30s. a hogshead, whilst the "second wringing" was worth only about 10s. a hogshead.

There is no doubt that the cider system is a very bad one. It would be infinitely better that the peasant should have the value of the cider—which, by the bye, is generally estimated by the farmer to be worth considerably more than it is really worth—in money. To a man with such wretched wages every penny is of value. But the system is unfair to the labourer, because under the "cider system" his wages are greatly over-estimated; and I believe the horrible compound which the farmers call cider, but which I think should properly be called vinegar, works the most pernicious effects upon the constitution of the rural labourer.

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## CHAPTER VII.

## FACT IS STRANGER THAN FICTION.

" With fingers weary and worn,  
 With eyelids heavy and red,  
 A woman sat in unwomanly rags,  
 Plying her needle and thread.

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Work—work—work !  
 My labour never flags ;  
 And what are its wages ? A bed of straw,  
 A crust of bread, and rags,  
 That shattered roof—and this naked floor—  
 A table—a broken chair ;  
 And a wall so blank, my shadow I thank  
 For sometimes falling there."

*Hood.*

THE story of George Mitchell, "the man from the plough," had thrown a really romantic interest around the scenes of his early life ; and I therefore determined to pay a visit to his native village. I must confess that in all the enquiries which I had previously made I had scarcely discovered anything that equalled the misery and wretchedness of that place. More than a quarter

of a century had rolled away since my hero of the plough, escaping from the bondage of his hard-hearted employer, had plodded away from his wretched home, and from the "romantic" associations of his childhood, and had commenced in the wide world that brave and unfriended struggle which was destined to lead to so prosperous and successful a career.

To reach the village of Montacute from the main line of the Bristol and Exeter Railway the traveller must change at the Durston junction on to the Yeovil line, and a journey of a few miles across low-lying marsh ground brings him, after passing Langport, to the little town of Martock. I alighted at the Martock station of the Durston and Yeovil line, and proceeded on foot for two or three miles—a lovely walk—to the village of Montacute, which is situated in a kind of valley at the foot of three hills—St. Michael's-hill, Ham-hill, and Stokedown. My road lay through the village of Stoke-sub-Hamdon. At this place there are very large glove factories, which give employment to the female portion of the population of this and the surrounding villages. I was told that the work performed by the factory women and girls, mostly at their own homes, is excellent. Many of the labourers' families—that is, the female portion of them—are employed on the glove work, and but for that there is very little doubt that they would starve. Some of them are able to earn from the factories two or three shillings a week—for

very excellent work a little more—in order to supplement the wretched wages received by the peasants. But when this factory work is done it is of course done to the neglect of the families of the poor. Passing through Stoke-sub-Hamdon, I went into one of the cottages, and saw a miserable interior, and heard a sad tale of want. The husband was a farm labourer, steady and industrious, with a wife and several children. The wretched ground-floor was paved unevenly with large stones, through the crevices of which the dampness came in wet weather. Over the ground-floor was one small room, which had to accommodate the family as a sleeping apartment. For this wretched hut 1s. 6d. a week had to be paid. There was a tiny piece of potato ground attached to it, not nearly enough, though, to find the family in potatoes. The wife informed me that her husband was a "piece worker," and when he obtained employment he received 2s. a day and three pints of cider. The employment, however, was very precarious. That week he had lost a day. The previous week he had lost two days, thus reducing his miserable wages to eight shillings a week; and in both cases the loss had been occasioned in consequence of the wet weather.

On entering Montacute I was forcibly struck by the loveliness of the scenery immediately surrounding the village. The first object of note is the splendid mansion of the Phelips family, who are the great land-

owners in the district, the whole of Montacute, I believe, and some of the land in the adjoining villages belonging to them. Montacute House was built nearly 300 years ago, of stone which is obtainable from some excellent quarries now in full work on Ham-hill. The whole, or nearly so, of the houses in the place are built of this particular stone, which is said to excel in some respects the celebrated Bath stone. Montacute is situated almost in the extreme southern portion of the mid-division of Somersetshire. The wages I found had recently been augmented in consequence of the "strike" of the agricultural labourers in different parts of the country, and were then 10s. a week—on the average possibly a little less. Only a short time previously, however, they were 9s. a week. I made a great number of inquiries in the houses of the poor labourers, and I elicited the most painful facts. It was impossible for me to see such scenes of wretchedness without feeling compelled to tender some relief before quitting the miserable hovels. The following are a few of the cases which I investigated:—

George H——, seventy years of age, piece worker, 1s. 6d. a day. A family of ten persons, ranging in age from sixteen downwards. Some of the family were able to earn something towards their maintenance, but had to do so to the total neglect of their education—a really deplorable condition of things. The cottage to accommodate this family consisted of three

small rooms, for which 1s. 6d. a week was paid as rent.

Abraham B—— earned 10s. a week, raised recently from 9s. Rent of cottage 1s. 3d. a week. It contained two rooms only, in one of which, the bedroom, thirteen persons had slept on some previous occasions. There was no garden to the cottage. There were six children in the family, besides the father and mother. Some of the children were able to earn a little in farm work, but not enough to find them with a sufficient quantity of bread, which I ascertained to be  $7\frac{1}{2}$ d. the quartern loaf. I was informed by the wife of Abraham B—— that the family had not tasted butchers' meat during the year. A ragged little boy of about five years old was standing by his mother, who told me that the day before she had nothing to give the child to eat—not even bread—until eight o'clock at night. Of all the distressing sights which one can witness anywhere, I do not know of anything that is really more heart-rending than to see poor little children actually wanting bread. I visited another family of ten persons, including the father and mother. The wages had been 9s., and were then 10s. a week. For the cottage 1s. 6d. a week was paid. The females of the family, the mother and one daughter, eked out the wretched wages of the father by doing work for the glove manufacturers. There was a small piece of allotment ground which grew potatoes enough to last for about three



months in the year, and for which a rent of 7s. a-year was paid. In all the cases which I have enumerated cider was given, generally three pints, but sometimes only two pints daily, reckoned at 1d. per pint, or in the case of an allowance of three pints per day, 1s. 6d. per week. In some cottages which I visited the rooms were almost bare of furniture. The single bedrooms, which in many cases had to accommodate the whole of a family, often contained nothing but a squalid bedstead, and perhaps a small table and a broken chair, with a few ragged clothes on the bedsteads, not nearly enough to keep the poor creatures warm. Clothes, in fact, which would have been barely sufficient to cover one bed, had to serve also for the covering of the little ones who had to lie about in different parts of the floor.

Amidst all this terrible poverty of the peasants in Montacute, the land in the neighbourhood is some of the richest in the whole of the county. In fact, its productiveness is so extraordinary that I was assured by a competent authority that a large farmer could realise a fortune in seven years in the district. The farmers there pay 1*l.* 10s. and 2*l.* an acre for land that is worth 4*l.* and 5*l.* an acre respectively, and the profits on farming are consequently enormous. One farm contains 500 acres of land worth about 4*l.* an acre, but for which the farmer pays about 30s. an acre. On this farm I found that ten men only were employed,

and on another farm of 200 acres that two men only were employed. There are in Montacute three other farms, containing respectively 240, 144, and 134 acres.

I was informed on the most reliable authority that one piece of ground in the parish, consisting of eight acres, had in eighteen months produced three crops—two of clover, and one of wheat. The value of each entire crop of clover was 45*l.*, and the value of the wheat crop was at the rate of 14*l.* an acre. Yet for this very land, so enormously productive, only 2*l.* 5*s.* an acre was paid as rent.

I was told a sad tale of the hardships of the poor female glove-makers, who often have to travel long distances from outlying hamlets and villages in order to earn the most miserable pittance. The following instance is no uncommon illustration of this. Three young women got up at four o'clock one morning and walked three miles to the glove-factory, where, after waiting about until noon, they received work for which when they had taken it home and completed it, and walked back to the factory again, they obtained only eightpence each in payment.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

## STARVATION.

“ Shame, oh shame—on the miser creed  
Which holds back praise or pay  
From the men whose hands make rich the lands,—  
*For who earn it more than they?*  
Then sing for the kings who have no crown  
But the blue sky o’er their head ;—  
Never Sultan or Dey had such power as they  
To withhold or to offer bread.”

*The Kings of the Soil.*

DURING my rambles through Somersetshire I found that almost everywhere there had been just previous to my visit some slight concession made to the poor labourers, in the shape of a small addition to their wages ; and it appeared to me that this concession was one of the best indications of the deplorable condition of these unfortunate men, because it was a tacit acknowledgment of their right to better treatment. Considering in the first place that farmers generally appear to be about the last class of employers to make concessions—and, in the next place, that there had not been any important “strikes” in the county, this

action on the part of the farmers was very significant. In no cases, however, as far as I could discover, had the advances been more than one shilling a-week. In fact, with so unusually rich a soil, and with farming profits, as a natural consequence, so very large in most cases, it would have been a singular circumstance had not some advance been made by employers. At any rate, the fact is patent, and it conclusively proves, as I venture to think, all that I have hitherto advanced respecting the agricultural question in Somersetshire. Nevertheless, with the miserable addition which had been made to the wages of the labourers, I found their incomes barely sufficient to keep body and soul together.

Cannington, about four miles from Bridgewater, is said to have been the birthplace of "Fair Rosamund," who, it is alleged, was educated at the nunnery which exists in the neighbourhood, and which was founded in 1138. Lord Clifford is the lord of the manor and a principal landowner, and Lord Cavan is another proprietor. The Bouverie family, descendants of John Pym, own land and have a country seat at Cannington. From the "Park," a piece of high ground, a view can be obtained of the low-lying though rich and extensive pasture lands which stretch from Bridgewater to the sea. This tract of land is watered by the river Parrett, which, rising in Dorsetshire, flows along a course forty miles in length, entering Somersetshire near Crewkerne,

and flowing by way of Langport and Bridgewater, across an extensive tract of marsh country celebrated for its great fertility, into the Bristol Channel at Burnham. Bridgewater, the birthplace of Admiral Blake, besides being the centre of one of the richest agricultural districts in England, is a thriving seaport town containing a population of 12,101 persons, according to the census of 1871. The Parrett, which waters the splendid tract of grazing land to which I have referred, brings up to the town with each tide a wealth of mud, which is deposited on the banks of the river immediately around Bridgewater, and is the material from which the celebrated, but misnamed, "Bath bricks" are made. The extraordinary fertility of the land lying in the neighbourhood of the Parrett between Bridgewater and the Bristol Channel may be proved by the fact that a portion of this land, known as the Pawlett Hams, has risen in value, within the memory of people now living in Bridgewater, from 2*l.* to 6*l.* an acre. At Cannington and in the neighbourhood of Bridgewater the wages of the peasants were, I found, on an average about 9*s.* or 10*s.* a-week, having a short time before my visit received the addition of 1*s.* a-week. To these miserable wages must be added the three or four pints of cider daily. Out of this pay the rent of a cottage had of course to be paid, and the rent ranged in most cases from 1*s.* to 1*s.* 6*d.* per week. Hugh B——, a strong and vigorous labourer informed me that he worked by

the day, losing his employment in wet weather; his wages were 2s. per day, but deducting the time which he thus lost, his average weekly wages were only about 9s. or 9s. 6d. a-week. He had a wife and five children, the eldest twelve and the youngest three. They were all girls, and none of them could earn anything to supplement his miserable pay. He sent them all to school, paying 2d. for one child, the rest receiving their schooling free. Hugh paid 1s. 6d. a-week for the rent of his cottage, 4d. a-week to a clothing club, and 2d. a-week to a coal club. He did not keep a pig, but had a small garden attached to his cottage, in which he was able to grow a few potatoes. Deducting from his average wages the sums which he paid out as enumerated above, there was left a sum of about 7s. 6d. with which to provide food and most of the clothing for a family of seven persons. Hugh told me that the only substitutes for meat which his family could ever afford were red herrings. The children often had to be sent hungry to school. When the wife could absent herself from home she was able to earn 8d. a-day at farm work. I cannot help thinking that it is degrading to our common humanity that women having families of young children to care for should be compelled, in order to keep their little ones from actual starvation, to work on farms, often subjected to the inclemencies of the weather, for such a miserable wage as 8d. a-day. Hugh B—— told me that the day previous to my

interview with him all the money he had was  $5\frac{1}{2}$ d., with which he bought a half-quartern loaf and a herring, as the sole provision which he could make for his family for the day. He assured me that he himself had had nothing to eat that day—it was then evening.

It is of course impossible that a man with a wife and family can properly feed and clothe them on such miserable wages as are received by the peasants in the west of England. As Canon Girdlestone has observed, they do not “live,” in the proper sense of the word. All that can be said is that “they don’t die.” The wages received by the rural labourers in Somersetshire very fairly represent their condition, because the holding of allotments and the keeping of pigs are the exception and not the rule. Many people imagine that the resident labourer, besides his wages, almost obtains a living for his family from the produce of his allotment-ground and from the keeping of a pig. In some other parts of England this may in some instances be the case, but it is certainly not so in the county of Somerset.

Another important point which appears to be altogether lost sight of is the enormous profit which the farmers in the west of England generally make out of the peasants, when the latter rent allotment-ground. If the labourer obtains his allotment, those who advocate the extension of the excellent system of giving plots of land to the tiller of the soil consider that he

has obtained all which he can desire, provided he gets a sufficient quantity of ground to raise a substantial crop of potatoes and other vegetables. But the rent which he pays for the privilege does not appear to form a subject for consideration. In the neighbourhood of Bridgewater, excepting the Pawlett Hams and including the portions of land which lie between Bridgewater and Cannington, the rent which the farmer pays the landowner is about £3 an acre. The labourers' allotments are, as a rule, about one-eighth of an acre in extent. I have been, however, credibly informed that, although the quantity is nominally the eighth of an acre, it is generally less. For these allotments the peasantry pay a rent which is equal in many cases to £12 an acre. The farmer thus gets four times as much for the rent of the allotment-land as he pays himself. The land is generally ploughed up by the farmer, and the labourer has to take it in that rough state, and dress and prepare it for cultivation. This is not all. The allotments are held annually, in most instances, from the farmer. I am told that in very many cases when the peasant has improved his allotment by tillage, he is often turned out of it at the end of a year, in order that the farmer may benefit by the improvement which the poor labourer has been able to make from his wretched wages. It is done in this way. The farmer tells his small tenant that he has determined not to let out again for allotment the land which the labourer holds, giving some



kind of excuse for his determination, but says that he will not object to let him another plot of ground on his farm—the “other plot” being uncultivated land. I have these facts on the most reliable testimony; and but for such testimony I could not have believed that such shameless practices could exist.

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## CHAPTER IX.

### THE TRAGIC STORY OF SEDGEMOOR.

“What ear so empty is that hath not heard the sound  
Of Taunton’s fruitful Deane, not matched by any ground.”  
*Camden.*

THE Vale of Taunton Deane includes perhaps some of the richest and most productive land in the whole of the county of Somerset. Corn and crops of all kinds are grown in abundance, and the numerous orchards produce large quantities of apples, from which the cider is made which forms so important an element in the agricultural wages system of the county. The Vale of Taunton, in fact, is widely known as a great “cider country.”

Taunton itself has been the scene of some tragic incidents in the history of the Somersetshire peasants. Everyone has heard of Judge Jeffreys’ “campaign in the West,” and of “The Bloody Assize.” The igno-

rant and infatuated tillers of the soil who, in 1685, followed the fortunes of the Duke of Monmouth in his ill-starred attempt at rebellion, found their scythes as ineffectual against the troops of King James the Second as they find them in the present day useless as a means of earning a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. Monmouth's army was principally composed of the peasantry of the Western Counties. We are told that the better classes held aloof from the unfortunate Duke, who, with his sturdy peasant band, to the number of 4,000, entered Taunton, and was proclaimed king—a fatal step—on June 20th. A very brief period of triumph ensued. The Royal troops were mustering in the neighbourhood. But the peasants intrepidly followed Monmouth, who advanced to give battle to the enemy. Attempting to surprise the Earl of Feversham, who with his army was posted on Sedgemoor, near Bridgewater, Monmouth and his followers advanced across the moor. The rustics had been creeping furtively forward, armed with the implements of agriculture. Ditch after ditch had been passed, and they were almost upon the foe, slumbering in false security—for it was night—when all at once a ditch, deeper, darker, and broader than any they had hitherto passed, stood before them. They paused. An attempt was in vain made to find a fordable spot. Confusion ensued, and a pistol was discharged by accident. The Royal troops sprang to arms, and opened a terrible

fire upon the poor peasants. Monmouth, like a coward as he was, fled for dear life. The brave peasants, left to themselves, fought on manfully with their scythes and rustic tools. Useless, however. The poor wretches were mowed down. At length, forced by overwhelming numbers, they wavered and gave way. Then ensued a scene of fearful butchery. A thousand peasants were left dead, or in the agonies of death, upon the battle-field. The soil of Somersetshire was then indeed watered with the blood of her bravest sons. But the victors were still relentless. Dead and dying were hurried into the same graves. The time was the middle of June. The corn was not yet ripe, but it stood high and afforded shelter for the fugitives who sought, in terror, its friendly protection. They were followed, however, dragged from their hiding-places, and butchered in cold blood. Those who escaped death on the field were reserved for the tender mercies of the bloodthirsty Jeffrèys. Taunton witnessed the darkest scenes of this historical tragedy. In that town 144 were executed and 284 received sentence of transportation. The peasants condemned to death were hung, scores of them, upon the sign-post of the "White Hart Inn," and their heads and limbs posted about on trees, hedges, and steeples.

It is to be feared that the condition of the peasantry around Taunton has improved but little since the time of the Bloody Assize. But if the advance

of civilisation has done little for the tillers of the soil in the Vale of Taunton, it has vastly improved the administration of justice, and I was very pleased to notice that Taunton boasts of a modern "Assize Hall," which is alike creditable to the town and to the county. Placed on gently rising ground, and partly embosomed in trees, "the New Shire Hall" has a charming appearance. Amongst other things it contains, "The Gallery of Somersetshire Worthies," white marble busts of Henry Byam, the Somersetshire loyalist, of John Pym, of Admiral Blake, of John Locke, of "the good Bishop Ken," of Thomas Young, and lastly, of Captain Speke. I learnt that the Shire Hall owed its "Gallery of Worthies" to the exertions chiefly of my friend, Mr. Kinglake, of Weston-Super-Mare. I should not forget to say that the church of St. Mary Magdalene possesses one of the finest and most beautiful towers in England. Taunton has on more than one occasion stood siege against an invading force; and once during the civil wars of the Commonwealth, a Somersetshire pig is said to have saved the town. The garrison of the castle, (a portion of which still remains), reduced to one pig, but wishing to persuade the besiegers that there was ample provision within the castle walls for a lengthened seige, drove this solitary and unfortunate animal round the ramparts, pricking it to make it squeal, and impress the enemy with the belief that

they possessed an unlimited supply of "bacon." A similar story has, it appears, been told of other of the Somersetshire castles; but it is generally believed that Taunton Castle was the scene of the pig romance.

Around Taunton I found that the labourers generally were very badly paid. On my way from the town to the village of Norton Fitzwarren, I encountered one of the finest specimens of an English agricultural labourer that I have ever seen. He was tall, robust, and muscular; twenty-three years of age. I questioned him as to his circumstances. He had a wife and two children. His wages were 9s. per week, out of which he paid 1s. 9d. per week for his cottage rent. He obtained, in addition to his wages, the usual quantity of cider. He believed that his master intended increasing the wages of his labourers by 1s. a-week. This had been done in the surrounding districts, and I found that the average wages which were given were from 9s. to 10s. a-week, with the cider in addition. For carters and shepherds generally 1s. a-week more. As far as my inquiries had extended, I found that the condition of the labourers always depended upon the individual generosity of the farmers. Some farmers treated their men well, gave them good wages, with allotment-ground at a low rent, and would, unasked, make an advance in wages when necessary. I am sorry to say, however, that such cases are exceptional. What makes it worse for the labourers is that

the system of low wages has engendered generally habits of improvidence. It is not at all to be wondered at. When men find that by the most persevering attempts it is impossible to make both ends meet, they will naturally fall into reckless habits. Between Norton Fitzwarren and Taunton, on my way back to the last-named place, I was fortunate in meeting a large farmer and owner of land in the Norton parish. This gentleman, whom I knew, had recently advanced the wages of his labourers. I entered into conversation with him, and found that he shared the opinion, in common with the more intelligent and better class of farmers, that to raise the peasant will in the end be the best thing that can happen for the farmer and landed proprietor. He agreed with me in my opinion that the best thing both for masters and men would be an equal division of agricultural labour all over the country, so that the question might be reduced to the natural limits of supply and demand. In some parts of England labour is badly wanted, and agriculturalists are able and willing to pay good wages. The inevitable result will be that all surplus labour—and perhaps the existence of so much surplus labour in the west of England is partly the reason of the miserable wages which are given to the peasants there, must be removed to other parts of England or to our colonies. If the present agricultural movement does nothing else, it will no doubt exercise a very

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useful purpose by equalising the labour in the various districts of England, so that the surplus in one district may counterbalance the demand for labour in other places.

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## CHAPTER X.

### A MODERN COWHERD.

“ When the fresh spring in all her state is crown'd,  
And high luxuriant grass o'erspreads the ground,  
The labourer, with the bending scythe is seen  
Shaving the surface of the waving green.”

*John Gay.*

THE day following my inquiries in the neighbourhood of Taunton, I paid a visit to that part of Somersetshire which has been for ever rendered famous by the story of King Alfred. I am almost inclined to think that a thousand years has wrought a change in the circumstances of the Somersetshire peasant which is anything but creditable to our advanced civilisation. Everyone remembers the tale of the cowherd into whose cottage Alfred the Good and Wise was glad to enter for a short time to escape from his enemies, and to concert those plans which he was immediately afterwards destined to carry out so successfully. One envies the quiet and seclusion of the Athelney peasant of the ninth century; and it is not difficult to imagine that the life of the rustic labourer of that period was a

happy one, and that, however much he may then have been deficient in education, he was at least surrounded by material comforts. In all that I have been able to say from the experience gained during my visit to Somersetshire concerning the condition of the rural labourer in that county, I do not think that I have adduced anything which will more powerfully prove that the labourer in that part of England is in a terribly degraded position, than the assertion, which I maintain, that in a thousand years no real improvement has taken place in his condition either mentally or physically. In fact, I should think that he has rather retrogressed than advanced in any way. The average Somersetshire peasant I find cannot read or write, and he is in almost every way deplorably ignorant. The civilisation which has found its way into the agricultural labourer's cottage has rather produced wretchedness than contentment, for it has engendered wants and desires that cannot be supplied and attained. The isle of Athelney is situated at the point of junction between the rivers Parrett and Tone. It is no longer covered with wood, as in King Alfred's time, but has been turned into a modern English farm. Passing through the village of Athelney, I entered a labourer's cottage. I was attracted to visit its interior by the sight of a small crowd of little children who blocked up the doorway. I passed across the tiny piece of front garden which served to grow a few potatoes for the



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family, and, stooping under the doorway, entered the "basement." I was politely invited by the "goodwife" to seat myself in the chair on the stone floor. Thus shut in from the outer world, I felt that it was impossible for even the most imaginative mind to suppose that there was any similarity between the peasant of to-day and the peasant of a thousand years ago. All before me was unromantic; there was nothing present but the reality of modern wretchedness. Edwin H—— was the occupier of the cottage. He was a regular farm labourer, and he received for the support of himself, a wife, and eight children, all of whom I saw, 9s. per week from a modern English farmer. The eldest of the children was a girl of twelve, the youngest was a baby of three months; seven were girls, and the infant in arms was the only boy. Five pounds a-year was the sum paid to the landlord for rent, and a little more than 7s. a-week was therefore left to supply the bodily needs of ten persons, with the addition of a few pence earned occasionally by the eldest girl for willow-stripping. Not one of the family had tasted animal food for about six months, except what on very rare occasions had been given by chance benevolence. Bread was the great luxury. Baker's bread, which I learnt was in Athelney 7d. the quartern loaf, was, however, an unknown delicacy in this family circle. The goodwife informed me that she could not possibly afford to buy baker's bread, but that she obtained the

meal and manufactured at home a coarser article for herself, her husband, and her little ones. The good-wife who scolded King Alfred for allowing her cakes to burn was surely a happier being than this modern mother of eight children. The question naturally arose how could this family of ten exist at all under such privations? Private benevolence was the secret. A private gentleman in the neighbourhood filled the kind and useful office of benefactor, and distributed gifts to the poor.

Leaving Athelney, I soon entered the village of Stoke-St.-Gregory. On the marshes in the neighbourhood are grown large quantities of willow-trees. The stripping of the bark from the withies—as the twigs of these trees are called—gives employment to a number of women and children in the neighbourhood. The rate of remuneration is 4d. a bundle, and by working for nearly twelve hours a-day it is sometimes possible for a woman to earn 1s. a-day. In the parishes of Stoke-St.-Gregory, North Curry, and Hatch Beauchamp, the Hon. W. H. P. Gore Langton, one of the members for the county, has estates. I believe a great number of the cottages on these estates are very bad—some of them being, in fact, mere mud hovels. Along my line of route I noticed the several gradations from the pigstye to the inhabited cottage of the peasant. I saw a number of cottages in a state of transformation. It was curious to note how very

easily a mud hovel was turned into a "barn," by taking out what might perhaps be facetiously termed the windows of such a hovel, and substituting boards in their place. I learnt, however, that Mr. Langton had recently had some new cottages built on parts of his estate. The average wages in Stoke-St.-Gregory and North Curry parishes were I found 9s. a-week for ordinary labourers, and 10s. in most cases for carters and modern "cowherds." In some of the districts in the neighbourhood I was informed that men were actually receiving only 8s. a-week. This I understood was the case at Hatch Beauchamp, where is situated the seat of the Langton family. A woman living in the parish of North Curry assured me that her husband, Henry R——, although now in receipt of 9s. per week as a regular farm labourer, had only recently been promoted to that magnificent stipend, having not long since been paid 8s. a-week. His cottage I found cost Henry R—— £4 6s. a-year. He was, however, privileged to rent of the farmer a quarter of an acre of potato ground, at a rent for that quantity of land of £2 5s. a-year. I inquired what price the farmer had to pay, on the average, for land in the neighbourhood of North Curry, and I was informed that the value of the land was £2 10s. an acre. So that the farmer in this parish only charged *four times* as much for the labourer's allotment as he paid himself! Henry R——'s family consisted of his wife and six children.

Although the wages are so wretchedly low in the place which I have just been describing, I was very glad to find that in one or two other places a somewhat more healthy state of things had commenced. Whilst I was in Somersetshire I received a letter from Mr. C. H. Fox, a large manufacturer, residing at Wellington, in that county. Mr. Fox said :—"The current rates for ordinary agricultural labourers in this neighbourhood until about a year ago were 9s. or 10s. per week, with cider, for ordinary labourers. The same with a cottage and garden for carters and shepherds; or if without cottage 12s. per week. On the south side of our Blackdown hills, in the villages of Clayhidon, Hemyock, and Church Taunton, the rate was lower than this—8s. and cider with cottage, or 9s. without, being the average miserable remuneration of an able-bodied labourer. Now all this is rapidly changing. We have sent away a considerable number of men from that locality to the colonies. The North and Wales are attracting great numbers. Men are becoming scarce, and the natural excellent result is rapidly following. Last week I was informed that a neighbouring farmer offered 14s. per week in money for two able-bodied farm men; and I am glad to be able to hope that the more natural law of supply and demand will very shortly establish in this neighbourhood the advance in wages and material prosperity which is so desirable."

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Mr. Fox appears from this letter to have been doing at Wellington and in the immediately surrounding districts what Canon Girdlestone did for so long a time in Devonshire. There is no doubt that this kind of philanthropy is practical and business-like, and if more extensively exercised would lead to the happiest results for the poor peasants in the west of England.

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## CHAPTER XI.

### A FAMILY OF TWELVE.

“ All honour be then to these grey old men  
When at last they are bowed with toil ;  
Their warfare then o'er, they battle no more,  
For they've conquered the stubborn soil.  
And a chaplet each wears in his silver hairs,  
And ne'er shall the victor's brow,  
With a laurel crown to the grave go down,  
Like the sons of the Good Old Plough !”

*The Good Old Plough.*

AS a natural consequence of the miserable wages given to the Somersetshire peasant, it appears that the county, according to a recent Poor Law return, stands amongst the highest in the scale of poverty, taking the English counties generally, paupers forming no less than 6·8 per cent. of the population. In the reports of Commissioners on the employment of women and children in agriculture, made in 1868-9, wages are returned as at 7s. or

8s. per week in West Somerset, with cider and sometimes perquisites; and at 12s. per week in East Somerset. The eastern division of Somersetshire extends from the populous cities of Bath and Bristol on the north, to the line of the Mendip Hills, which, stretching across the county from Whatley, near the town of Frome, in the east, to the Bristol Channel at Weston-super-Mare, may, roughly speaking, be considered as the boundary between East and Mid Somerset. It is in the eastern division of the county that the highest wages are given to the labourers. Probably the proximity of that district to the cities of Bath and Bristol may exercise some influence upon the rates of remuneration to agricultural labourers. Bristol contains 182,524, and Bath contains 53,714 inhabitants. Weston-super-Mare is also a very rising town. A mere village thirty years ago, its population has rapidly increased and actually doubled itself between 1851 and 1861. The town has been called Bristol-super-Mare, and it is to Bristol what Brighton is to London. The presence of the large manufacturing population of Bristol and of two such fashionable resorts as Bath and Weston-super-Mare are no doubt, therefore, the cause, in a great measure, of the condition of the labourers in agriculture in the eastern division of Somersetshire being not quite so wretched as in the other parts. Taking that division of the county generally, it may be fairly stated that at the time of my visit to it the average wages were not higher

than 11s. or 12s. a-week, with the addition of the usual quantity of cider. I saw and conversed with a labourer sixty-three years of age concerning his experience, extending over a period of fifty years, during which he worked on farms in this part of the county. I was informed by a gentleman who had known the man for a great many years, that he bore an unblemished character. He could read and write very well, and was what is termed a skilled agricultural labourer. He had occasionally, during harvest time, been able to earn as much as £1 a week, but, taking one season with another, during his fifty years' service, his average wages, he assured me, were only 12s. a-week. He ordinarily worked in the summer from five a.m. to six p.m., and frequently, during harvest, from 4.30 a.m. till twelve at night. I believe farmers in Somersetshire frequently do not give any money payment for the extra work at harvest time. For very hard work, often extending over six extra hours per day on those occasions, the peasant gets nothing in such cases but an extra allowance of cider and his supper. My informant told me that on his average wages of 12s. a-week he had brought up a family of ten children; his excellent wife adding to his income by taking in, from time to time, some needle-work. Four years ago, the man informed me, his wife and all his ten children had sat round his table on Christmas Day. At one time his wife and five children were prostrated by a fever. On that occasion it was

only by the benevolence of the medical man who attended them—and I find that the doctors in the rural districts are very good to the poor—that he was able to avoid the burden of overwhelming debt. No such luxuries as sugar or butter ever found their way into his family. Candles also are rarely used by the labourers, who have often during long winter evenings to sit without candle light, often without fire. It is difficult to imagine anything more wretched than sitting hungry for hours in the darkness.

There is no doubt that the "cider system" is the bane of the peasants in the cider-producing counties in the west of England. An old report on the employment of women and children in agriculture confirms what I have previously stated with regard to the real value of the cider supplied to the labourer. The Commissioner, referring to the cider, says: "I am, however, inclined to think that the estimated value between master and labourer is too high. Every farm in the cider counties has an orchard, and cider is part of the annual produce." The Commissioner also states that "the cider received by the women in part of their wages is not commonly drunk by them; it is more frequently kept for their husbands, though there are cases where it is partly or even wholly consumed by the women themselves."

I found in my inquiries in the west of England that these remarks very well apply to the present circum-



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stances of the peasants. There is, as I have previously remarked, a very great difficulty in dealing with the cider question in these cider-producing counties. In many cases employers offer their men their full wages in money in lieu of part in money and part in kind. But very often the men will not accept service under such conditions, but insist upon having their daily allowance of three pints or four pints, sometimes even of five pints of cider. I met a farmer in the western division of Somersetshire, where wages are so very low, who informed me that he could not get men to work without cider. The fact is the peasants have become so used to the system that they cannot get out of their habits. Nevertheless I consider that the system is very unfair. The men should be paid the value of their labour in money, instead of its being required of them, as in most cases it is, that they should receive a fifth of their miserable pay in sour cider. The truck system is bad generally. The legislature has recognised the evils of it, and I consider that cider truck is the worst part of the system. Every man should receive his wages in full in the coin of the realm, and be permitted to use it as he thinks proper, instead of being obliged to take it out partly in the wretched rubbish that the farmers in the cider counties draw from tap number two.

## CHAPTER XII.

## THE "PRIVILEGES" OF THE PEASANT.

"I have loved the rural walk through lanes  
Of grassy swarth, close cropp'd by nibbling sheep,  
And skirted thick with intermixture firm  
Of thorny boughs ; have loved the rural walk  
O'er hills, through valleys, and by river's brink."

*Cowper.*

I EXTENDED my inquiries concerning the condition and mode of life of the Somersetshire peasant into that remote portion of the county bordering upon Exmoor. To reach the extreme north-western part of the western division of Somersetshire it is necessary to proceed to the Williton station of the West Somerset line, and from that point to take the coach which runs between Williton and Porlock. I was very much amused, shortly after we had got clear of the little town of Williton, to be told by the driver, who was one of the communicative class, that he had heard there was an "inspector going over the country and publishing in the newspapers all that he could find out concerning the farm labourers."

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"A chiel's amang you takin' notes,  
An' faith he'll prent it."

Our coachman, however, had noticed, he said, that the average wages were generally quoted, but he thought it would be more fair to mention the lowest wages also.

The route from Williton to Dunster lies through some of the most magnificent scenery in Somersetshire, beautiful peeps at the Bristol Channel being obtained from time to time as we ascended the crest of an eminence. We soon passed Washford, Bilbrook, and Carhampton, and found ourselves at the beautiful little village of Dunster. Turning a point of the road, just before entering the village, we caught a splendid view of Dunster Castle on our left. The castle is the seat of the Luttrell family, and, placed on rising ground in the midst of its beautiful park, presenting a most magnificent appearance. From Dunster I walked to Wootton Courtenay, a small village about four miles from the first-named place. The road wound amongst the hills, and the scenery was so lovely and so thoroughly Devonian in its character that I could not help thinking that the line dividing the two counties had been drawn too far to the west. The principal landowners in the district are Mr. Dutton, the lord of the manor of Wootton Courtenay, Mr. Luttrell, of Dunster Castle, Sir Thomas Acland, and Squire Hole. I made

a great number of inquiries concerning the peasants, and I found that two months previous to my visit the wages had been as low as 8s. per week. In addition to this sum two pints of cider were given daily, the value of which was reckoned by the farmer at 1s. a-week, thus bringing the miserable wages, even supposing the cider was worth the sum at which it was put down by the farmers, to 9s. a-week. Out of these wages cottage rent was paid in most cases, the greater number of the cottages being charged to the labourers at 1s. a-week. Wages, however, had been slightly augmented, and I found that for the regular farm labourers they were, at—the time of my inquiry taking an average of the district, 9s. per week, and only two pints of cider daily the allowance of cider in the districts surrounding Dunster being less than in almost every other part of Somersetshire. I was informed that one farmer was giving his regular men only 1s. each per day, or 6s. per week; but, in addition to that, giving them cottages rent free, valued, as in most other cases, at 1s. a-week. The cottages estimated at this weekly rental contained for the most part only two rooms, one over the other. The family, therefore—and I could not learn that the families in that neighbourhood were smaller in number than in other parts of the county—were compelled to sleep, all of them in many cases, in one room. Such a state of things is simply shocking, and I cannot conceive anything calculated to produce

more evil results in every way. What amount of moral sensibility can we expect to find in agricultural labourers when, from their very birth, they are accustomed to herd together like animals? I think it would be advisable that the law should step in to compel landowners to erect for the labourers on their estates cottages in the arrangements of which some regard should be had for common decency. Some of the cottages of Wootten Courtenay had no gardens; others were provided with them. The farmers, however, in most cases gave their men, free of rent, portions of potato ground, each portion being on the average about one-eighth of an acre in extent. Most of the peasants also rented allotments of the lord of the manor, Mr. Dutton. These allotments were nearly all of the same size, and were about 35 "yards," or nearly a quarter of an acre each. For each of these a rent of 1rs. 8d. was paid. For fuel the labourers generally cut turf from the moors. In several parts of Somersetshire the moors afford large quantities of this turf, or peat, which is regularly cut, dried, and sold to the people in the towns and villages throughout the county; thus constituting a rather active branch of industry, giving a subsistence to many hundreds of the peasants, who in such cases, however, are not engaged at all in farm work, but live by selling "turf." The "turf," as it is called in that part of the country, makes excellent fuel. It is principally used in the

towns for lighting fires, but the peasants often use nothing else. On the moors, where it abounds, the "top crust" is first taken off, and then underneath there is found a very thick bed of "turf," which extends for a considerable number of feet into the earth. This is dug out, cut into small squares, and then carted into the towns and sold at the doors.

In the neighbourhood of Wootten Courtenay, the peasants are able to provide a considerable portion of their fuel from the "turf." There is also a tacit understanding between the farmers and their labourers that when the latter have dug and cut their turf, the farmers will give them the use of their horses and carts to haul it to their homes. The promise to do this, though, is on the condition that the horses and carts shall be lent only when they can be spared. The result, consequently, is that very often the poor labouring man, after piling upon the moors a quantity of turf, finds it spoilt by rain when the farmer finds it "inconvenient" to lend the horse and cart. These contingencies consequently necessitate that the peasant should purchase coal from time to time. So that the "turf" privilege is not so great as it might appear. It appears when the turf has been burnt the ashes constitute an excellent manure, and the farmers buy them of the men to use for their land.

In the neighbourhood of Dunster, as in many other places, there exists the "privilege" (?) which has

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been made a good deal of by farmers and landowners, but the value of which is, in my opinion, very questionable. I refer to the system of giving "grist corn." The "privilege" amounts to this: The peasant is allowed to have at all times corn at six shillings per bushel, whether the market price is above or below that price. It must not be supposed, however, that the tiller of the soil gets the best corn. Far from it. No doubt a good and generous master will see that his labourer gets corn of at least a fair quality; but generally the "grist corn" is the "rakings" from the field after the bulk of the crops has been taken away. These "rakings" often lie, I am told, for some time in the fields, and in wet weather—which in our changeable climate, as is well known, constantly occurs during harvest—the "rakings" get soaked and begin to grow out. The consequence, therefore, is that when the poor peasant gets his "grist corn" it is frequently useless; and, from what I could learn, it is the farmer and not the labourer who benefits from the "grist corn" system, which is supposed to confer so great a privilege upon the latter. Now and then the farmer may allow the peasant as much as a bushel of "grist corn" once a fortnight at the regulation price; but I believe the average quantity allowed is much less. In the neighbourhood of Dunster and Wootten Courtenay, the average allowance is between two and three pecks once in the fortnight. The quantity, however, depends

upon the individual generosity of the farmer; and also, I may remark, upon his sense of honour and fair dealing. I must not omit to mention that during the harvest month the men can earn something extra by working overtime. Some farmers during that season give their men the ordinary wages and their meals in addition; others pay them, the best of the peasants that is, 2s. 6d. and 3s. a day without any meals. It must be remembered, however, that the men for this extra pay often have to work from four in the morning until ten at night, sometimes, on moonlit nights, until as late as twelve. At Wootten Courtenay and in the neighbourhood I found that the children of the peasants could earn something by picking on the hills the whortle-berries during the season—July and August—when these berries are ripe and plentiful. This wild fruit is used a great deal for pies and puddings by the poorer classes of people in Somersetshire; in fact, I believe it is the only fruit that the peasants are able to afford. The berries also are sold in great quantities in the towns, being hawked about by itinerant vendors. These whortleberry dealers go out to the hills in the moor countries, and establish a kind of market overt, to which the pickers bring their fruit. Children sometimes during the whortleberry season are able to earn 8d. and 1s. a-day; but this is very precarious, and the quantity picked and the sums gained depend upon many circumstances.



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From inquiries which I made at Wootten Courtenay I learnt that the rector, the Right Rev. James Chapman, and his curate, the Rev. C. Sainsbury, were very good to the poor, and that there was never a case of distress that did not elicit their active sympathy and help. The rector, I was told also, kept a number of cows and gave all the milk to the poor. Connected with the Wootten Courtenay Church there is an admirable school, numbering 114 in a population of little over 400. The schools are under the kind and watchful superintendence of the two excellent clergymen.

The rise in wages, generally from 8s. to 9s. per week, had arisen in consequence of wood-felling being required for a railway which was being made from Watchet to Minehead, and of some mining operations which were being carried on in the neighbourhood, the men engaged in these occupations receiving 2s. 6d. a day. Of course it is always the case where any such works are carried on that the value of the labourer in agriculture increases.

I must take the opportunity of acknowledging, in this place, the very great courtesy and kindness which were extended to me on the occasion of my visit to Wootten Courtenay by the two clergymen to whom I have just referred.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE WEST OF ENGLAND SANATORIUM.

“ Fair spring o’er nature held her gentlest sway,  
Fair morn diffused around her brightest ray ;  
Thin mists hung hovering on the distant trees,  
Or rose from off the fields before the breeze.”

*Sir Walter Scott.*

ONE of my most pleasing reminiscences is a visit which I paid to the West of England Sanatorium. It was a lovely morning as I left the beautiful town of Weston-super-Mare, and took my way along the Uphill Road. The sun was shining down in all his splendour, and the soft sea breeze was exercising its gentlest influence : and these characteristics of a genial spring morning were the fit accompaniment of the pleasing sight which met my eyes on arriving at the Sanatorium. But I must premise that there is no watering-place anywhere on the coast of our beautiful island more suitable in every way as the site of an institution similar to the one about which I am going to speak : in fact, there are very few places in England so well suited for that purpose. Weston-super-Mare is without doubt

one of the most lovely of sea-side resorts. It would scarcely be too much to say that it is the most beautiful watering place in Somersetshire. It is essentially modern, and therein lies its excellence as a place for recreation and enjoyment. It has grown to its present position by very rapid strides, and there is every probability that a great future is in store for it. Unfortunately, however, it is sorely deficient in handsome and commodious churches. Being one of the two healthiest towns in the kingdom, the establishment in close proximity to it of the West of England Sanatorium, whilst a wise and prudent act, was at the same time an act that reflects the very highest credit upon Weston-super-Mare. Notwithstanding the rapid strides of the town, the Sanatorium has grown much faster. Its birth dates from no longer ago than 1868. From a very small commencement in that year it has become developed into an important institution; and there is every probability that, although at the present time it has grown so large as to have entirely lost its local character, it is even yet but the nucleus of what it is destined one day to become. The especial object of the West of England Sanatorium is to provide a temporary home for those in the humbler walks of life who are recovering from illness, and who may require, but who have not the means, to seek rest and recreation. To the struggling clerk, the artizan, or the poor peasant, or to the wives and families of such, it is impossible, under ordinary circumstances, that the

strength lost through severe illness can be restored by a resort to the seaside, because such a step would be attended with too great expense. At a nominal cost, therefore, the West of England Sanatorium provides all the requirements of a convalescent retreat, and places within reach of the poor the comfort and enjoyment which, without such an institution, would be brought only within reach of the wealthier classes.

Under the kind guidance of my friend Mr. Arthur Kinglake, one of the chief promoters of the Sanatorium, and of Mr. C. Pooley, the excellent honorary surgeon, I went over the building, and made myself acquainted with its admirable arrangements. By the courtesy of the lady superintendent, I was permitted to see the inmates; and it was indeed a pleasing sight to mark the returning glow of health on the faces of the convalescents, and to notice the happiness and contentment engendered by the kind and gentle treatment which prevails at the Sanatorium. The noble and unselfish men who plan such institutions as the West of England Sanatorium, and give their time and their money for the benefit of their poorer fellow creatures, great as their reward is in the consciousness of having done that which is right and good, cannot but feel with the poet when he exclaims—

“ Oh sweeter than the sweetest flower  
At ev'nings dewy close,  
The will united with the power  
To succour human woes !

And softer than the softest strain  
Of music to the ear,  
The placid joy we give and gain  
By gratitude sincere."

One of the most munificent donors to the West of England Sanatorium is Mr. William Gibbs, of Tyntesfield, a gentleman of large means and as large a heart. Much more of this kind of practical philanthropy is required in Somersetshire, not merely for the extension of the West of England Sanatorium, but for the elevation from their depressed and down-trodden condition of the tillers of its rich and beautiful lands.

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#### CHAPTER XIV.

##### A SUNDAY WITH CANON GIRDLESTONE AT HALBERTON.

"The ploughman homeward plods his weary way."

*Gray.*

WHILST in the West of England, I accepted a very kind invitation from Canon Girdlestone to visit him at the Halberton Rectory. The Canon's invitation was accompanied by the courteous offer to place me in possession of all the facts connected with the work of peasant migration which he had been carrying on for so many years in Devonshire. Halberton lies about midway between the town of Tiverton and the Tiverton Junction Railway. Previous to his going

to live at Halberton, Canon Girdlestone had resided in Lancashire, and accustomed during his residence in that county to see the farm labourers well fed, well housed, and in all respects well cared for, he was painfully struck on arriving in "the garden of England" by the wretched appearance of the North Devonshire peasant, whose miserable wages, squalid home, and generally depressed and down-trodden condition strongly moved his pity. My description of the worst state of the peasants in Somersetshire will apply with equal truth to the condition of the labourers at Halberton on the arrival of Canon Girdlestone. During the height of the Cattle Plague in 1866 the excellent Canon preached a sermon in the Halberton Church from the text, "Behold the hand of the Lord is upon thy cattle;" and in this sermon he told the farmers present that they ought to regard the plague on their cattle as a punishment, because they treated their cattle better than their human labourers. This sermon raised a storm of indignation from the farmers in the district, and open war was at once declared against the minister who had dared in the pulpit to make so deep a homethrust. From that time there was little peace for the brave clergyman who, regardless of the opinion of the local magnates, set his shoulder manfully to the wheel, which it may fairly be said that his own courage had set in movement. The Halberton Vestry, composed exclusively of landowners and farmers, en-

deavoured in every way to set the Vicar at defiance, and get the management of affairs into their own hands. At meeting after meeting they would not hear him speak. The Canon, however, always occupied, as of right, the Chair; and, when the farmers at these meetings were tired of their own noise, would quietly say, "Now, gentlemen, when you have done abusing me, we will proceed to business." The climax of the disgraceful scenes, which periodically took place at the vestry meetings, was reached on Easter Monday, 1867, when a vestryman farmer went up to Canon Girdlestone, and in language which cannot be literally repeated told the excellent Vicar that he was not fit to carry offal to a bear. A few days afterwards this scene was reproduced in *Punch*. The vestry then attempted to elect both churchwardens, so as to deprive the Vicar of all control over parochial affairs. After a somewhat long trial, the Court of Queen's Bench in 1868 decided against the Vestry, who were involved in very heavy costs.

Nevertheless, with a noble courage, and amidst the most bitter persecution, carried on by the ignorant and churlish yeomen to the extent of slighting and passing unnoticed even the ladies of the Vicar's family, Canon Girdlestone commenced and carried on in North Devonshire his admirable work of migrating the peasants. During five years he has sent away from that county into Yorkshire, Durham, Lancashire,

Kent, and Suffolk, between four and five hundred labourers, many of them with families. He has sent a number of men to the Manchester, and also to the West Riding Police Forces. From miserable hovels in Devonshire, and from starvation wages of 8s. per week, and no "privileges," these men have gone to situations with wages which have never been less than 13s. a week, with cottages and gardens free of rent, and their wages have ranged from 13s. to as much as 22s. per week. From squalor and misery the poor peasants have been removed to comfortable homes, and have entered the service of kind and generous masters. This work of migration was of course attended with great expense. But an appeal through the press, to the public, brought the necessary funds; and when the Canon's excellent work became fairly known to employers in the north of England, they expressed their willingness to advance the money for the expenses of removing the peasants, whom they required; and the stream once set flowing northwards, the work of migration soon became developed into a system. The poor rustics, most of them, could neither read nor write; and when told that they were going to be sent to—for instance—some well-known place in the north of England, frequently asked in their ignorance and simplicity whether they were about to go "over the water." But Canon Girdlestone, aided in his noble work by the ladies of his family,



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spared no pains to make their journey as safe and pleasant as possible; and to each labourer leaving for the north plain directions, written in a large hand, were given, so that the officials on the various lines of railway might render them, as they did willingly, every possible assistance.

The landowners and farmers who waged such deadly war, for a long time, against Canon Girdlestone, prophesied that almost every kind of misfortune would befall the kind gentleman, in consequence of his conduct in espousing the cause of the peasants. They said they would cause the church to be deserted, and would dismiss any of their men who ventured even to ring the bells. But all the terrible disasters predicted by the farmers have failed of realization. I attended the morning and afternoon services at Halberton Church, and on each occasion the Rev. Canon delivered an excellent discourse in the well-filled church, the free seats being crowded by the peasants. The choir sung admirably, Mrs. Girdlestone being the organist. I also, in company with the Canon, visited the excellent Sunday School in connection with the church.

But Halberton and North Devon have suffered a great loss. Canon Girdlestone and his family have taken their departure from the scene of their active and benevolent work in Devonshire, and have gone to reside at Olveston, in Gloucestershire; and whilst

the peasants of Halberton and the country round are deprived of the presence of an earnest and courageous friend in the excellent clergyman who has so manfully stood by them for so long a time, the kind and gentle ministrations of the ladies of the Vicar's family will be missed from many a humble home.

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## CHAPTER XV.

"FACTS ARE STUBBORN THINGS."

"Depend upon it, the interests of classes too often contrasted are identical, and it is only ignorance which prevents their uniting for each other's advantage."—*Prince Albert's Golden Precepts.*

I AM very desirous that the object which I have in view in the publication of "The 'Romance' of Peasant Life in the West of England" should not be misunderstood. My principal aim has been to deal with facts because I believe that nothing will plead so strongly for any cause as the stern eloquence of facts. I might therefore fairly send forth my book without the addition of this concluding chapter, and leave to a discriminating public the function of passing judgment upon the statements which I have carefully and truthfully made. But I cannot conclude without making an earnest attempt to impress those who may read my book with the belief that the present movement for the elevation of the rural labourer is a good and a righteous

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movement, and that it is not the result of an agitation fomented by professed and paid agitators. In a recent address to his tenantry in Oxfordshire, His Grace the Duke of Marlborough says—I quote from the *Times*—that he cannot too strongly urge upon them “the necessity of prudence and forbearance in a state of things which owes its origin to none of those causes by which strikes in productive trades are generally determined, but which has been brought about by agitators and declaimers who have unhappily too easily succeeded in disturbing the friendly feeling which used to unite the labourer and his employer in mutual feelings of generosity and confidence.” I ask the reader of the preceding chapters of my book how many indications of “generosity” he is able to find in the deplorable account which I have been compelled to give of the west of England peasants? It is my earnest wish that the mutual feelings of confidence and generosity between employer and employed should never be disturbed where those feelings exist. But do they generally exist in the west of England? I say, most emphatically, No! Let me not be misunderstood. There are farmers and labourers even in the west of England whose mutual relationships are everything that can be desired. There are landowners who compel their tenants to treat their labourers as men, and not as brutes. All honour to such men! They have nothing to fear from the “agricultural movement,” which is

such a nightmare to the cruel and heartless employer. I maintain, nevertheless, that such indications of generosity as I have admitted to exist in the West of England are the exception and not the rule. Could the wealthy dukes and others of the great landowners have gone as I have done into the cottages of the peasants and have seen the misery and wretchedness which I have seen, their hearts would have ached to see the "chill penury" which has found its way into the houses of the labouring population. If, instead of receiving the glowing descriptions often rendered to them by agents and stewards, the wealthy landlords would go from cottage to cottage on their estates, and find out for themselves the actual and deplorable conditions of their peasantry, they would cease to talk about the "existence of mutual feelings of generosity and confidence." I wish it to be understood, that I am confining my attention more especially to the case of the peasants in the west of England. Somersetshire possesses in the Earl of Cork and Orrery an able and popular Lord-Lieutenant. If that excellent nobleman could induce the other great owners of the soil; the Portlands, the Clevelands, the Devonshires, the Luttrells, the Lethbridges, the Langtons, and other of the county gentlemen, to visit their peasantry more frequently, and to take a more practical and active interest in the welfare of those dependent upon them, he would accomplish a noble work; for it must be remembered that,

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"Evil is wrought from want of thought,  
As well as from want of heart."

It is melancholy to reflect how much good might be done by the wealthy landowners, and how very little is really accomplished.

His late Royal Highness the Prince Consort was a noble example of what a landlord should be. Probably, no man ever took a more active and earnest interest in the welfare of the labourers on his estates than did Prince Albert. He was especially careful to build good cottages for his peasantry; and he took infinite trouble in their building and arrangements, thus giving proof of his tender and thoughtful care for his dependents.\* In fact, the object of his life was to do good to those whom Providence had placed under him. Not merely did that excellent Prince believe that the interests of employer and employed were identical, but he gave practical expression to his belief, and fairly earned for himself the title of Albert the Good.

Whilst I am strongly opposed to "strikes," I am convinced that, in self-defence, and in the absence of the mutual feelings of kindness and trustfulness which should exist between the landowner and farmer on the one hand, and the peasant on the other hand, it is absolutely essential that the rural labourer should avail

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\* His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has followed the excellent example of his illustrious father, by causing to be put in good repair the cottages on his estates at Sandringham.

himself of the protection afforded by union. I am also convinced that it is because landlords and agriculturists have failed to see that their interests are identical with those of the labourer, that the "agricultural movement" was ever commenced.

I cannot conceal the gratification which I experience in the reflection that I have been the humble instrument in effecting a large amount of good for the peasants in Somersetshire. The facts which I gathered during my inquiries as to the deplorable condition of the labourers in that county, were published in a London daily newspaper, and from its columns were quoted widely and copiously into the principal journals circulating in the west of England. The result was that I succeeded in arousing public attention to the subject; and it is my pleasing task to be able to record that, since my visit in almost every important district in Somersetshire, the wages of the labourer have been considerably augmented. But mine has been merely the task of a writer for the public press. There are noble hearts in the west of England to whom I have previously referred, whose active sympathies have been and are still enlisted in the cause of the labourer, and who, in spite of local prejudice and the sneers of the landowners and farmers, have manfully put themselves forward as the friends of the labouring poor.

But, notwithstanding the improvement which has already taken place, a great work yet remains to be

accomplished. The pernicious "cider system" must be abolished, so that the labourers may receive their wages all in coin of the realm. Cottages must be built and improved so as to render them fit for the habitation of human beings. The employment of women and young children in agricultural pursuits should be discouraged; much immorality would thus be prevented. The place of a wife and mother is at home, and the place for the children is the school. The peasant, moreover, should be allowed to take a personal interest in the soil which he cultivates, by the extension of the allotment system. My friend Mr. Arthur Kinglake, who has had great experience of that system, and who has published some excellent remarks upon the subject, says that, according to his own observation, the allotment system has a remarkably beneficial effect upon the peasant. "He becomes," says Mr. Kinglake, "for the time being an owner of the soil, and he has a feeling of independence which nothing else can give, and which at once exalts his character. His ground yields him a large supply of vegetables for his family, and enables him to keep and fatten a pig or two, and likewise some poultry, which fetch large prices. Besides these advantages from the allotment system, his children are trained to habits of industry and carefulness." I agree, adds Mr. Kinglake, "with the opinion of a well-known and much esteemed Dorsetshire Squire (Mr. Sturt), that the contented grunt or

murmur of a fattening pig is pleasanter to the agricultural labourer's ear than the delicious notes of the sweetest nightingale."

It has been said, doubtless with some truth, that one great cause of the deplorable condition of the peasants in the west of England is the existence there of so much surplus labour. In that case, no time should be lost in removing it. Mr. Frederick Young, a highly respected Middlesex magistrate—whose friendship it is my privilege to possess—during some discussions on Colonial questions, which took place at the Westminster Palace Hotel, last summer, proposed an excellent plan for the removal of surplus labour from England to the Colonies. The proposal was that the United Home and Colonial Government should together contribute towards the cost of emigrating those of the working classes who are not required at home; and that tickets at the uniform cost to the attending emigrant of £2 should be issued to all who desired them, enabling the holders to go to any of our Colonies. If the state would undertake the duty thus indicated, and suggested, of removing from our shores our surplus agricultural population the operation of the law of supply and demand would quickly raise those who were left to their proper place in the industrial system of the country.

THE END.

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